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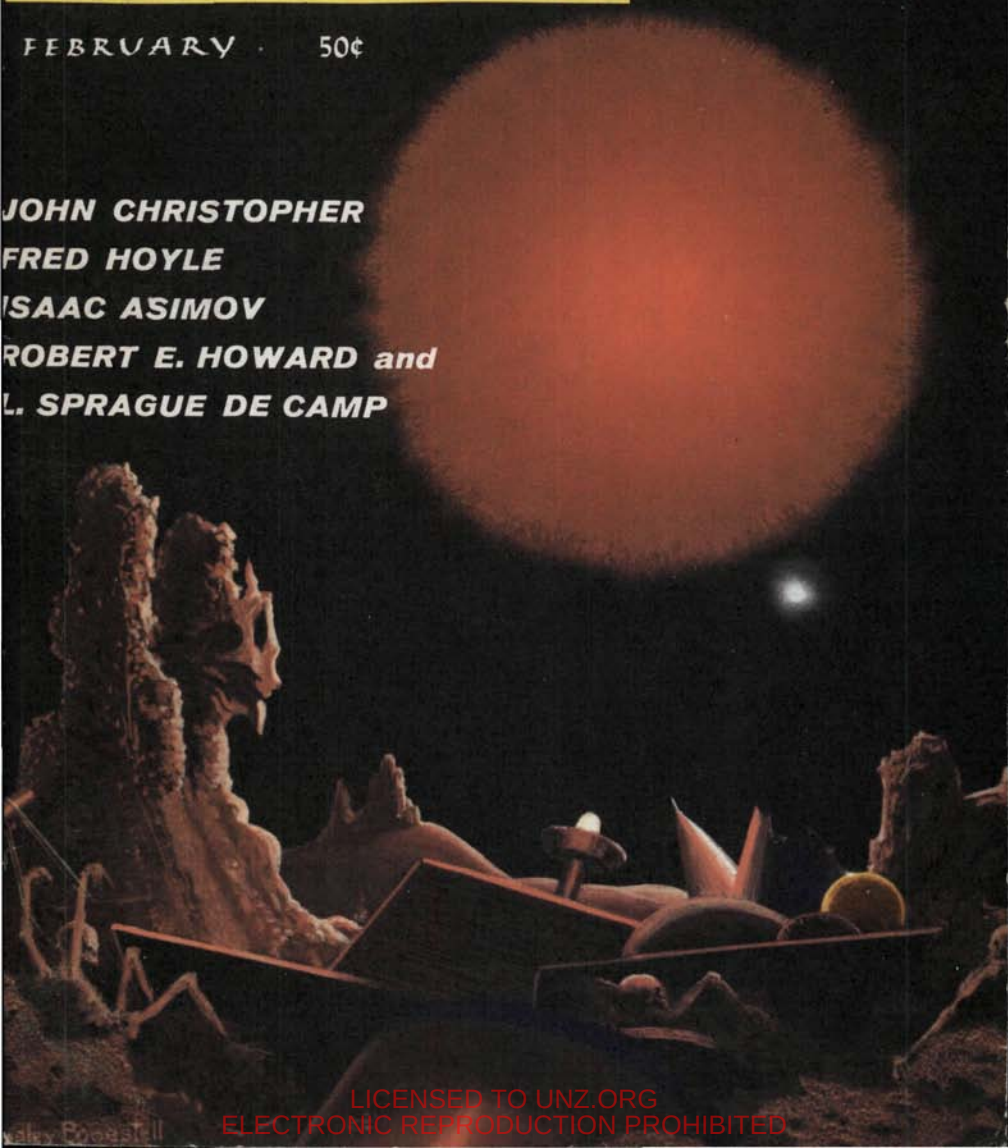
JOHN CHRISTOPHER
FRED HOYLE
ISAAC ASIMOV
ROBERT E. HOWARD and
L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP



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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction

FEBRUARY *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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One of the greatest writers of heroic fantasy was Robert Ervin Howard (1906-36), who was born and lived most of his short life in Cross Plains, Texas. Howard was a voluminous writer for the pulp magazines of the decade preceding his death. For a time he made, from his writings, the largest income of anybody in Cross Plains—including the town banker.

Howard's most memorable character was Conan the Cimmerian, a gigantic barbarian adventurer of prehistoric times when magic worked. Conan is supposed to have lived about twelve thousand years ago, in Howard's imaginary Hyborian Age, between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginnings of recorded history. Coming as a lawless, footloose youth from the northern land of Cimmeria, Conan wades through rivers of blood and overcomes foes both natural and supernatural to become, at last, king of Aquilonia.

Conan (as Dr. John D. Clark once described him) "is the armored swashbuckler, indestructible and irresistible, that we've all wanted to be at one time or another"—the personification of the secret yearning of every skinny runt to be, just once, a huge and mighty roughneck. In the course of his adventures, Conan's enemies once captured and crucified him. As he hung on the cross, a vulture flew down to peck at his eyes, and Conan bit the bird's head off. You just can't have a tougher hero than that.

Eighteen Conan stories were published during Howard's lifetime, one in a fan magazine and the rest in Weird Tales. *Since 1950, a number of unpublished Conan stories—some complete and some fragmentary—have turned up in collections of Howard's papers. (Howard never threw anything away, so even his high-school examination papers still exist.) The present story is one of six recently found by Glenn Lord, Howard's bibliographer and the agent for his estate. It deals with Conan's early life, when he was living precariously as a thief in the easterly kingdom of Zamora, before he began his career as a mercenary soldier, a pirate, and in time a general and a statesman.*

In its original form, this tale consisted merely of a 650-word outline without any text. L. Sprague de Camp, who has edited or completed other posthumously published Conan stories by Howard, has written the present story, following Howard's out-

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line and imitating his style. Mr. de Camp is the author of numerous works, including science fiction, fantasy, historical novels, and popularizations of science. He has had forty-odd books published, and with Fletcher Pratt was co-author, some years ago, of the Gavagan's Bar stories, most of which appeared in this magazine. Mr. de Camp denies that he ever intended to be Howard's posthumous collaborator. "It just happened that way. I had never even read a Howard story until 1950." At present he is editing the entire Conan saga—long out of print—for paperback publication.

THE HALL OF THE DEAD

by Robert E. Howard and L. Sprague de Camp

THE GORGE WAS DARK, ALthough the setting sun had left a band of orange and yellow and green along the western horizon. Against this band of color, a sharp eye could still discern, in black silhouette, the domes and spires of Shadizar the Wicked, the city of dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery—the capital of Zamora.

As the twilight faded, the first few stars appeared overhead. As if answering a signal, lights winked on in the distant domes and spires. While the light of the stars was pale and wan, that of the windows of Shadizar was a sultry amber, with a hint of abominable deeds.

The gorge was quiet save for the chirping of nocturnal insects. Presently, however, this silence was broken by the sound of moving men. Up the gorge came a squad of Zamorian soldiers—five men in plain steel caps and leather jerkins, studded with bronze buttons, led by an officer in a polished bronze cuirass and a helmet with a towering horsehair crest. Their bronze-greaved legs swished through the long, lush grass that covered the floor of the gorge. Their harness creaked and their weapons clanked and tinkled. Three of them bore bows and the other two, pikes; short swords hung at their sides and bucklers were

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slung across their backs. The officer was armed with a long sword and a dagger.

One of the soldiers muttered: "If we catch this Conan fellow alive, what will they do with him?"

"Send him to Yezud to feed to the spider god, I'll warrant," said another. "The question is, shall we be alive to collect that reward they promised us?"

"Not afraid of him, are you?" said a third.

"Me?" The second speaker snorted. "I fear nought, including death itself. The question is, whose death? This thief is not a civilized man but a wild barbarian, with the strength of ten. So I went to the magistrate to draw up my will—"

"It is cheering to know that your heirs will get the reward," said another. "I wish I had thought of that."

"Oh," said the first man who had spoken, "they'll find some excuse to cheat us of the reward, even if we catch the rascal."

"The prefect himself has promised," said another. "The rich merchants and nobles whom Conan has been robbing raised a fund. I saw the money—a bag so heavy with gold that a man could scarce lift it. After all that public display, they'd not dare to go back on their word."

"But suppose we catch him not," said the second speaker. "There was something about paying for it with our heads." The speaker raised his voice. "Captain Nestor! What was that about our heads—"

"Hold your tongues, all of you!" snapped the officer. "You can be heard as far as Arenjun. If Conan is within a mile, he'll be warned. Cease your chatter, and try to move without so much clangor."

The officer was a broad-shouldered man of medium height and powerful build; daylight would have shown his eyes to be gray and his hair light brown, streaked with gray. He was a Gunderman, from the northernmost province of Aquilonia, fifteen hundred miles to the west. His mission—to take Conan dead or alive—troubled him. The prefect had warned him that, if he failed, he might expect severe punishment—perhaps even the headsman's block. The king himself had demanded that the outlaw be taken, and the king of Zamora had a short way with servants who failed their missions. A tip from the underworld had revealed that Conan was seen heading for this gorge earlier that day, and Nestor's commander had hastily dispatched him with such troopers as could be found in the barracks.

Nestor had no confidence in the soldiers that trailed behind him. He considered them braggarts who would flee in the face of danger, leaving him to confront the barbarian alone. And, although the

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Gunderman was a brave man, he did not deceive himself about his chances with this ferocious, gigantic young savage. His armor would give him no more than a slight edge.

As the glow in the western sky faded, the darkness deepened and the walls of the gorge became narrower, steeper, and rockier. Behind Nestor, the men began to murmur again:

"I like it not. This road leads to the ruins of Larsha the Accursed, where the ghosts of the ancients lurk to devour passers-by. And in that city, 'tis said, lies the Hall of the Dead—"

"Shut up!" snarled Nestor, turning his head. "If—"

At that instant, the officer tripped over a rawhide rope stretched across the path and fell sprawling in the grass. There was the snap of a spring pole released from its lodgment, and the rope went slack.

With a rumbling roar, a mass of rocks and dirt cascaded down the left-hand slope. As Nestor scrambled to his feet, a stone the size of a man's head struck his corselet and knocked him down again. Another knocked off his helmet, while smaller stones stung his limbs. Behind him sounded a multiple scream and the clatter of stone striking metal. Then silence fell.

Nestor staggered to his feet, coughed the dust out of his lungs, and turned to see what had befallen. A few paces behind him, a rock slide blocked the gorge from wall to wall. Approaching, he made out a human hand and a foot projecting from the rubble. He called but received no reply. When he touched the protruding members, he found no life. The slide, set off by the pull on the rope, had wiped out his entire squad.

Nestor flexed his joints to learn what harm he had suffered. No bones appeared to be broken, although his corselet was dented and he bore several bruises. Burning with wrath, he found his helmet and took up the trail alone. Failing to catch the thief would have been bad enough, but if he also had to confess to the loss of his men, he foresaw a lingering and painful death. His only chance now was to bring back Conan—or at least his head.

Sword in hand, Nestor limped on up the endless windings of the gorge. A light in the sky before him showed that the moon, a little past full, was rising. He strained his eyes, expecting the barbarian to spring upon him from behind every bend in the ravine.

The gorge became shallower and the walls less steep. Gullies opened into the gorge to right and left, while the bottom became stony and uneven, forcing Nestor to scramble over rocks and underbrush. At last the gorge gave out

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completely. Climbing a short slope, the Gunderman found himself on the edge of an upland plateau, surrounded by distant mountains. A bowshot ahead, bone-white in the light of the moon, rose the walls of Larsha. A massive gate stood directly in front of him. Time had bitten scallops out of the wall, and over it rose half-ruined roofs and towers.

Nestor paused. Larsha was said to be immensely old. According to the tales, it went back to Cataclysmic times, when the forebears of the Zamorians, the Zhemri, formed an island of semi-civilization in a sea of barbarism.

Stories of the death that lurked in these ruins were rife in the bazaars of Shadizar. As far as Nestor had been able to learn, not one of the many men who had invaded the ruins, searching for the treasure rumored to exist there, had ever returned. None knew what form the danger took, because no survivor had lived to carry the tale.

A decade before, King Tiridates had sent a company of his bravest soldiers, in broad daylight, into the city, while the king himself waited outside the walls. There had been screams and sounds of flight, and then—nothing. The men who waited outside had fled, and Tiridates perforce had fled with them. That was the last attempt to unlock the mystery of Larsha by main force.

Although Nestor had all the usual mercenary's lust for unearned wealth, he was not rash. Years of soldiering in the kingdoms between Zamora and his homeland had taught him caution. As he paused, weighing the dangers of his alternatives, a sight made him stiffen. Close to the wall, he sighted the figure of a man, slinking toward the gate. Although the man was too far away to recognize faces in the moonlight, there was no mistaking that panther-like stride. Conan!

Filled with rising fury, Nestor started forward. He walked swiftly, holding his scabbard to keep it from clanking. But, quietly though he moved, the keen ears of the barbarian warned him. Conan whirled, and his sword whispered from its sheath. Then, seeing that only a single foe pursued him, the Cimmerian stood his ground.

As Nestor approached, he began to pick out details of the other's appearance. Conan was well over six feet tall, and his threadbare tunic failed to mask the hard lines of his mighty thews. A leathern sack hung by a strap from his shoulder. His face was youthful but hard, surmounted by a square-cut mane of thick black hair.

Not a word was spoken. Nestor paused to catch his breath and cast aside his cloak, and in that instant Conan hurled himself upon the older man.

Two swords glimmered like lightning in the moonlight as the

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clang and rasp of blades shattered the graveyard silence. Nestor was the more experienced fighter, but the reach and blinding speed of the other nullified this advantage. Conan's attack was as elemental and irresistible as a hurricane. Parrying shrewdly, Nestor was forced back, step after step. Narrowly he watched his opponent, waiting for the other's attack to slow from sheer fatigue. But the Cimmerian seemed not to know what fatigue was.

Making a backhand cut, Nestor slit Conan's tunic over the chest but did not quite reach the skin. In a blinding return thrust, Conan's point glanced off Nestor's breastplate, plowing a groove in the bronze.

As Nestor stepped back from another furious attack, a stone turned under his foot. Conan aimed a terrific cut at the Gunderman's neck. Had it gone as intended, Nestor's head would have flown from his shoulders; but, as he stumbled, the blow hit his crested helm instead. It struck with a heavy clang, bit into the iron, and hurled Nestor to the ground.

Breathing deeply, Conan stepped forward, sword ready. His pursuer lay motionless with blood seeping from his cloven helmet. Youthful overconfidence in the force of his own blows convinced Conan that he had slain his antagonist. Sheathing his sword, he turned back toward the city of the ancients.

The Cimmerian approached the gate. This consisted of two massive valves, twice as high as a man, made of foot-thick timbers sheathed in bronze. Conan pushed against the valves, grunting, but without effect. He drew his sword and struck the bronze with the pommel. From the way the gates sagged, Conan guessed that the wood of the doors had rotted away; but the bronze was too thick to hew through without spoiling the edge of his blade. And there was an easier way.

Thirty paces north of the gate, the wall had crumbled so that its lowest point was less than twenty feet above the ground. At the same time, a pile of tailings against the foot of the wall rose to within six or eight feet of the broken edge.

Conan approached the broken section, drew back a few paces, and then ran forward. He bounded up the slope of the tailings, leaped into the air, and caught the broken edge of the wall. A grunt, a heave, and a scramble, and he was over the edge, ignoring scratches and bruises. He stared down into the city.

Inside the wall was a cleared space, where for centuries plant life had been waging war upon the ancient pavement. The paving slabs were cracked and up-ended. Between them, grass, weeds, and a

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few scrubby trees had forced their way.

Beyond the cleared area lay the ruins of one of the poorer districts. Here the one-story hovels of mud brick had slumped into mere mounds of dirt. Beyond them, white in the moonlight, Conan discerned the better-preserved buildings of stone—the temples, the palaces, and the houses of the nobles and the rich merchants. As with many ancient ruins, an aura of evil hung over the deserted city.

Straining his ears, Conan stared right and left. Nothing moved. The only sound was the chirp of crickets.

Conan, too, had heard the tales of the doom that haunted Larsha. Although the supernatural roused panicky, atavistic fears in his barbarian's soul, he hardened himself with the thought that, when a supernatural being took material form, it could be hurt or killed by material weapons, just like any earthly man or monster. He had not come this far to be stopped from a try at the treasure by man, beast, or demon.

According to the tales, the fabled treasure of Larsha lay in the royal palace. Gripping his scabbarded sword in his left hand, the young thief dropped down from the inner side of the broken wall. An instant later, he was threading his way toward the center of the city. He made no more noise than a shadow.

Ruin encompassed him on every side. Here and there the front of a house had fallen into the street, forcing Conan to detour or to scramble over piles of broken brick and marble. The gibbous moon was now high in the sky, washing the ruins in an eerie light. On the Cimmerian's right rose a temple, partly fallen but with the portico, upheld by four massive marble columns, still intact. Along the edge of the roof, a row of marble gargoyles peered down—statues of monsters of bygone days, half demon and half beast.

Conan tried to remember the scraps of legend that he had overheard in the wineshops of the Maul, concerning the abandonment of Larsha. There was something about a curse sent by an angered god, many centuries before, in punishment for deeds so wicked that they made the crimes and vices of Shadizar look like virtues . . .

He started for the center of the city again but now noticed something peculiar. His sandals tended to stick to the shattered pavement, as if it were covered with warm pitch. The soles made sucking noises as he raised his feet. He stooped and felt the ground. It was coated with a film of a colorless, sticky substance, now nearly dry.

Hand on hilt, Conan glared about him in the moonlight. But

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no sound came to his ears. He resumed his advance. Again his sandals made sucking noises as he raised them. He halted, turning his head. He could have sworn that similar sucking noises came to his ears from a distance. For an instant, he thought they might be the echoes of his own footsteps. But he had passed the half-ruined temple, and now no walls rose on either side of him to reflect the sound.

Again he advanced, then halted. Again he heard the sucking sound, and this time it did not cease when he froze to immobility. In fact, it became louder. His keen hearing located it as coming from directly in front of him. Since he could see nothing moving in the street before him, the source of the sound must be in a side street or in one of the ruined buildings.

The sound increased to an indescribable slithering, gurgling hiss. Even Conan's iron nerves were shaken by the strain of waiting for the unknown source of the sound to appear.

At last, around the next corner poured a huge, slimy mass, leprous gray in the moonlight. It glided into the street before him and swiftly advanced upon him, silent save for the sucking sound of its peculiar method of locomotion. From its front end rose a pair of hornlike projections, at least ten feet long, with a shorter pair below. The long horns bent this way and that, and Conan saw that they bore eyes on their ends.

The creature was, in fact, a slug, like the harmless garden slug that leaves a trail of slime in its nightly wanderings. This slug, however, was fifty feet long and as thick through the middle as Conan was tall. Moreover, it moved as fast as a man could run. The fetid smell of the thing wafted ahead of it.

Momentarily paralyzed with astonishment, Conan stared at the vast mass of rubbery flesh bearing down upon him. The slug emitted a sound like that of a man spitting, but magnified many times over.

Galvanized into action at last, the Cimmerian leaped sideways. As he did so, a jet of liquid flashed through the night air, just where he had stood. A tiny droplet struck his shoulder and burned like a coal of fire.

Conan turned and ran back the way he had come, his long legs flashing in the moonlight. Again he had to bound over piles of broken masonry. His ears told him that the slug was close behind. Perhaps it was gaining. He dared not turn to look, lest he trip over some marble fragment and go sprawling; the monster would be upon him before he could regain his feet.

Again came that spitting sound. Conan leaped frantically to one side; again the jet of liquid flashed past him. Even if he kept

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ahead of the slug all the way to the city wall, the next shot would probably hit its mark.

Conan dodged around a corner to put obstacles between himself and the slug. He raced down a narrow zigzag street, then around another corner. He was lost in the maze of streets, he knew; but the main thing was to keep turning corners so as not to give his pursuer another clear shot at him. The sucking sounds and the stench indicated that it was following his trail. Once, when he paused to catch his breath, he looked back to see the slug pouring around the last corner he had turned.

On and on he went, dodging this way and that through the maze of the ancient city. If he could not outrun the slug, perhaps he could tire it. A man, he knew, could outlast almost any animal in a long-distance run. But the slug seemed tireless.

Something about the buildings he was passing struck him as familiar. Then he realized that he was coming to the half-ruined temple he had passed just before he met the slug. A quick glance showed him that the upper parts of the building could be reached by an active climber.

Conan bounded up a pile of rubbish to the top of the broken wall. Leaping from stone to stone, he made his way up the jagged profile of the wall to an unruined section facing the street. He found himself on a stretch of roof behind the row of marble gargoyles. He approached them, treading softly lest the half-ruined roof collapse beneath him and detouring around holes through which a man could fall into the chambers below.

The sound and smell of the slug came to him from the street. Realizing that it had lost his trail and uncertain as to which way to turn, the creature had evidently stopped in front of the temple. Very cautiously—for he was sure the slug could see him in the moonlight—Conan peered past one of the statues and down into the street.

There lay the great, grayish mass, on which the moon shone moistly. The eye stalks wavered this way and that, seeking the creature's prey. Beneath them, the shorter horns swept back and forth a little above the ground, as if smelling for the Cimmerian's trail.

Conan felt certain that the slug would soon pick up his trail. He had no doubt that it could slither up the sides of the building quite as readily as he had climbed it.

He put a hand against a gargoyle—a nightmarish statue with a humanoid body, bat's wings, and a reptilian head—and pushed. The statue rocked a trifle with a faint crunching noise.

At the sound, the horns of the slug whipped upward toward the

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roof of the temple. The slug's head came around, bending its body into a sharp curve. The head approached the front of the temple and began to slide up one of the huge pillars, directly below the place where Conan crouched with bared teeth.

A sword, Conan thought, would be of little use against such a monstrosity. Like other lowly forms of life, it could survive damage that would instantly destroy a higher creature.

Up the pillar came the slug's head, the eyes on their stalks swiveling back and forth. At the present rate, the monster's head would reach the edge of the roof while most of its body still lay in the street below.

Then Conan saw what he must do. He hurled himself at the gargoyle. With a mighty heave, he sent it tumbling over the edge of the roof. Instead of the crash that such a mass of marble would ordinarily make on striking the pavement, there floated up the sound of of a moist, squashy impact, followed by a heavy thud as the forward part of the slug's body fell back to earth.

When Conan risked a glance over the parapet, he saw that the statue had sunk into the slug's body until it was almost buried. The great gray mass writhed and lashed like a worm on a fisherman's hook. A blow of the tail made the front of the temple tremble; somewhere in the interior a few loose stones fell clattering. Conan wondered if the whole structure were about to collapse beneath him, burying him in the débris.

"So much for you!" snarled the Cimmerian.

He went along the row of gargoyles until he found another that was loose and directly over part of the slug's body. Down it went with another squashing impact. A third missed and shattered on the pavement. A fourth and smaller statue he picked bodily up and, muscles cracking with the strain, hurled outward so that it fell on the writhing head.

As the beast's convulsions slowly subsided, Conan pushed over two more gargoyles to make sure. When the body no longer writhed, he clambered down to the street. He approached the great, stinking mass cautiously, sword out. At last, summoning all his courage, he slashed into the rubbery flesh. Dark ichor oozed out, and rippling motions ran through the wet, gray skin. But, even though parts might retain signs of independent life, the slug as a whole was dead.

Conan was still slashing furiously when a voice made him whirl about. It said:

"I've got you this time!"

It was Nestor, approaching sword in hand, with a blood-

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stained bandage around his head in place of his helmet. The Gunderman stopped at the sight of the slug. "Mitra! What is this?"

"It's the spook of Larsha," said Conan, speaking Zamorian with a barbarous accent. "It chased me over half the city before I slew it." As Nestor stared incredulously, the Cimmerian continued: "What do you here? How many times must I kill you before you stay dead?"

"You shall see how dead I am," grated Nestor, bringing his sword up to guard.

"What happened to your soldiers?"

"Dead in that rock slide you rigged, as you soon shall be—"

"Look, you fool," said Conan, "why waste your strength on sword strokes, when there's more wealth here than the pair of us can carry away—if the tales are true? You are a good man of your hands; why not join me to raid the treasure of Larsha instead?"

"I must do my duty and avenge my men! Defend yourself, dog or a barbarian!"

"By Crom, I'll fight if you like!" growled Conan, bringing up his sword. "But think, man! If you go back to Shadizar, they'll crucify you for losing your command—even if you took my head with you, which I do not think you can do. If one tenth of the stories are true, you'll get more from your share of the loot than you'd earn in a hundred years as a mercenary captain."

Nestor had lowered his blade and stepped back. Now he stood mute, thinking deeply. Conan added: "Besides, you'll never make real warriors of these poltroons of Zamorians!"

The Gunderman sighed and sheathed his sword. "You are right, damn you. Until this venture is over, we'll fight back to back and go equal shares on the loot, eh?" He held out his hand.

"Done!" said Conan, sheathing likewise and clasping the other's hand. "If we have to run for it and get separated, let's meet at the fountain of Ninus."

The royal palace of Larsha stood in the center of the city, in the midst of a broad plaza. It was the one structure that had not crumbled with age, and this for a simple reason. It was carved out of a single crag or hillock of rock that once broke the flatness of the plateau on which Larsha stood. So meticulous had been the construction of this building, however, that close inspection was needed to show that it was not an ordinary composite structure. Lines engraved in the black basaltic surface imitated the joints between building stones.

Treading softly, Conan and Nestor peered into the dark interior. "We shall need light," said Nestor. "I do not care to walk into

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another slug like that in the dark."

"I don't smell another slug," said Conan, "but the treasure might have another guardian."

He turned back and hewed down a pine sapling that thrust up through the broken pavement. Then he lopped its limbs and cut it into short lengths. Whittling a pile of shavings with his sword, he started a small fire with flint and steel. He split the ends of two of the billets until they were frayed out and then ignited them. The resinous wood burned vigorously. He handed one torch to Nestor, and each of them thrust half the spare billets through his girdle. Then, swords out, they again approached the palace.

Inside the archway, the flickering yellow flames of the torches were reflected from polished walls of black stone, but underfoot the dust lay inches thick. Several bats, hanging from bits of stone carving overhead, squeaked angrily and whirred away into deeper darkness.

They passed between statues of horrific aspect, set in niches on either side. Dark hallways opened on either hand. They crossed a throne room. The throne, carved of the same black stone as the rest of the building, still stood. Other chairs and divans, being made of wood, had crumbled into dust, leaving a litter of nails, metallic ornaments, and semi-precious stones on the floor.

"It must have stood vacant for thousands of years," whispered Nestor.

They traversed several chambers, which might have been a king's private apartments, but the absence of perishable furnishings made it impossible to tell. They found themselves before a door. Conan put his torch close to it.

It was a stout door, set in an arch of stone and made of massive timbers, bound together with brackets of green-filmed copper. Conan poked the door with his sword. The blade entered easily; a little shower of dusty fragments, pale in the torchlight, sifted down.

"It's rotten," growled Nestor, kicking out. His boot went into the wood almost as easily as Conan's sword had done. A copper fitting fell to the floor with a dull clank.

In a moment they had battered down the rotten timbers in a shower of wood dust. They stooped, thrusting their torches ahead of them into the opening. Light, reflected from silver, gold, and jewels, winked back at them.

Nestor pushed through the opening, then backed out so suddenly that he bumped into Conan. "There are men in there!" he hissed.

"Let's see." Conan thrust his head into the opening and peered right and left. "They're dead. Come on!"

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Inside, they stared about them until their torches burned down to their hands and they had to light a new pair. Around the room, seven giant warriors, each at least seven feet tall, sprawled in chairs. Their heads lay against the chair backs and their mouths hung open. They wore the trappings of a bygone age; their plumed copper helmets and the copper scales on their corselets were green with age. Their skins were brown and waxy-looking, like those of mummies, and grizzled beards hung down to their waists. Copper-bladed bills and pikes leaned against the wall beside them or lay on the floor.

In the center of the room rose an altar, of black basalt like the rest of the palace. Near the altar, on the floor, several chests of treasure had lain. The wood of these chests had rotted away; the chests had burst open, letting a glittering drift of treasure pour out on the floor.

Conan stepped close to one of the immobile warriors and touched the man's leg with the point of his sword. The body lay still. He murmured:

"The ancients must have mummified them, as they tell me the priests do with the dead in Stygia."

Nestor looked uneasily at the seven still forms. The feeble flames of the torches seemed unable to push the dense darkness back to the sable walls and roof of the chamber.

The block of black stone in the middle of the room rose to waist height. On its flat, polished top, inlaid in narrow strips of ivory, was a diagram of interlaced circles and triangles. The whole formed a seven-pointed star. The spaces between the lines were marked by symbols in some form of writing that Conan did not recognize. He could read Zamorian and write it after a fashion, and he had smatterings of Hyrkanian and Corinthian, but these cryptic glyphs were beyond him.

In any case, he was more interested in the things that lay on top of the altar. On each point of the star, winking in the ruddy, wavering light of the torches, lay a great, green jewel, larger than a hen's egg. At the center of the diagram stood a green statuette of a serpent with upreared head, apparently carved from jade.

Conan moved his torch close to the seven great, glowing gems. "I want those," he grunted. "You can have the rest."

"No, you don't!" snapped Nestor. "Those are worth more than *all the other treasure in this room* put together. I will have them!"

Tension crackled between the two men, and their free hands stole toward their hilts. For a space they stood silently, glaring at each other. Then Nestor said:

"Then let us divide them."

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"You cannot divide seven by two," said Conan. "Let us flip one of these coins for them. The winner takes the seven jewels, while the other man has his pick of the rest. Does that suit you?"

Conan picked a coin out of one of the heaps that marked the places where the chests had lain. Although he had acquired a good working knowledge of coins in his career as a thief, this was entirely unfamiliar. One side bore a face, but whether of a man, a demon, or an owl he could not tell. The other side was covered with symbols like those on the altar.

Conan showed the coin to Nestor. The two treasure hunters grunted agreement. Conan flipped the coin into the air, caught it, and slapped it down on his left wrist. He extended the wrist, with the coin still covered, toward Nestor.

"Heads," said the Gunderman.

Conan removed his hand from the coin. Nestor peered and growled: "Ishtar curse the thing! You win. Hold my torch a moment."

Conan, alert for any treacherous move, took the torch. But Nestor merely untied the strap of his cloak and spread the garment on the dusty floor. He began shoveling handfuls of gold and gems from the heaps on the floor into a pile on the cloak.

"Don't load yourself so heavily that you can't run," said Conan. "We are not out of this yet, and it's a long walk back to Shadizar."

"I can handle it," said Nestor. He gathered up the corners of the cloak, slung the improvised bag over his back, and held out a hand for his torch.

Conan handed it to him and stepped to the altar. One by one he took the great, green jewels and thrust them into the leathern sack that hung from his shoulder.

When all seven had been removed from the altar top, he paused, looking at the jade serpent. "This will fetch a pretty price," he said. Snatching it up, he thrust it, too, into his booty bag.

"Why not take some of the remaining gold and jewels, too?" asked Nestor. "I have all I can carry."

"You've got the best stuff," said Conan. "Besides, I don't need any more. With these I can buy a kingdom! Or a dukedom, anyway, and all the wine I can drink and women I—"

A sound caused the plunderers to whirl, staring wildly. Around the walls, the seven mummified warriors were coming to life. Their heads came up, their mouths closed, and air hissed into their ancient, withered lungs. Their joints creaked like rusty hinges as they picked up their pikes and bills and rose to their feet.

"Run!" yelled Nestor, hurling his torch at the nearest giant and snatching out his sword.

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The torch struck the giant in the chest, fell to the floor, and went out. Having both hands free, Conan retained his torch while he drew his sword. The light of the remaining torch flickered feebly on the green of the ancient copper harness as the giants closed in on the pair.

Conan ducked the sweep of a bill and knocked the thrust of a pike aside. Between him and the door, Nestor engaged a giant who was moving to block their escape. The Gunderman parried a thrust and struck a fierce, backhanded blow at his enemy's thigh. The blade bit, but only a little way; it was like chopping wood. The giant staggered, and Nestor hewed at another. The point of a pike glanced off his dented cuirass.

The giants moved slowly, or the treasure hunters would have fallen before their first onset. Leaping, dodging, and whirling, Conan avoided blows that would have stretched him senseless on the dusty floor. Again and again his blade bit into the dry, woody flesh of his assailants. Blows that would have decapitated a living man only staggered these creatures from another age. He landed a chop on the hand of one attacker, maiming the member and causing the giant to drop his pike.

He dodged the thrust of another pike and put every ounce of strength into a low forehand cut at the giant's ankle. The blade bit half through, and the giant crashed to the floor.

"Out!" bellowed Conan, leaping over the fallen body.

He and Nestor raced out the door and through halls and chambers. For an instant Conan feared they were lost, but he caught a glimpse of light ahead. The two dashed out the main portal of the palace. Behind them came the clatter and tramp of the guardians. Overhead, the sky had paled and the stars were going out with the coming of dawn.

"Head for the wall," panted Nestor. "I think we can outrun them."

As they reached the far side of the plaza, Conan glanced back. "Look!" he cried.

One by one, the giants emerged from the palace. And one by one, as they came out into the growing light, they sank to the pavement and crumbled into dust, leaving their plumed copper helmets, their scaled cuirasses, and their other accouterments in heaps on the ground.

"Well, that's that," said Nestor. "But how shall we get back into Shadizar without being arrested? It will be daylight long before we get there."

Conan grinned. "There's a way of getting in that we thieves know. Near the northeast corner of the wall stands a clump of trees. If you poke around among the shrubs

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that mask the wall, you will find a kind of culvert—I suppose to let the water out of the city in heavy rains. It used to be closed by an iron grating, but that has rusted away. If you are not too fat, you can worm your way through it. You come out in a lot where people dump rubbish from houses that have been torn down."

"Good," said Nestor. "I'll—"

A deep rumble cut off his words. The earth heaved and rocked and trembled, throwing him to the ground and staggering the Cimmerian.

"Look out!" yelled Conan.

As Nestor started to scramble up, Conan caught his arm and dragged him back towards the center of the plaza. As he did so, the wall of a nearby building fell over into the plaza. It smashed down just where the two had been standing, but its mighty crash was lost in the thunder of the earthquake.

"Let's get out of here!" shouted Nestor.

Steering by the moon, now low in the western sky, they ran zigzag through the streets. On either side of them, walls and columns leaned, crumbled, and crashed. The noise was deafening. Clouds of dust arose, making the fugitives cough.

Conan skidded to a halt and leaped back to avoid being crushed under the front of a collapsing temple. He staggered as fresh tremors shook the earth beneath him. He scrambled over piles of ruin, some old and some freshly made. He leaped madly out from under a falling column drum. Fragments of stone and brick struck him; one laid open a cut along his jaw. Another glanced from his shin, making him curse by the gods of all the lands he had visited.

At last he reached the city wall. It was a wall no longer, having been shaken down to a low ridge of broken stone.

Limping, coughing, and panting, Conan climbed the ridge and turned to look back. Nestor was no longer with him. Probably, he thought, the Gunderman had been caught under a falling wall. Conan listened but could hear no cry for help.

The rumble of quaking earth and falling masonry died away. The light of the low moon glistened on the vast cloud of dust that covered the city. Then a dawn breeze sprang up and slowly wafted the dust away.

Sitting on the crest of the ridge of ruin that marked the site of the wall, Conan stared back across the site of Larsha. The city bore an aspect entirely different from when he had entered it. Not a single building remained upright. Even the monolithic palace of black basalt, where he and Nestor had found their treasure, had crumbled into a heap of broken blocks.

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Conan gave up thoughts of going back to the palace on some future occasion to collect the rest of the treasure. An army of workmen would have to clear away the wreckage before the valuables could be salvaged.

All of Larsha had fallen into heaps of rubble. As far as he could see in the growing light, nothing moved in the city. The only sound was the belated fall of an occasional stone.

Conan felt his booty bag, to make sure that he still had his loot, and turned his face westward, towards Shadizar. Behind him, the rising sun shot a spear of light against his broad back.

The following night, Conan swaggered into his favorite tavern, that of Abuletes, in the Maul. The low, smoke-stained room stank of sweat and sour wine. At crowded tables, thieves and murderers drank ale and wine, diced, argued, sang, quarreled, and blustered. It was deemed a dull evening here when at least one customer was not stabbed in a brawl.

Across the room, Conan sighted his sweetheart of the moment, drinking alone at a small table. This was Semiramis, a strongly built, black-haired woman several years older than the Cimmerian.

"Ho there, Semiramis!" roared Conan. "I've got something to show you! Abuletes! A jug of your best Kyrian! I'm in luck tonight!"

Had Conan been older, caution would have stopped him from openly boasting of his plunder, let alone displaying it. As it was, he strode up to Semiramis' table and up-ended the leathern sack containing the seven green gems.

The jewels cascaded out of the bag, thumped the wine-wet table top—and crumbled instantly into fine green powder, which sparkled in the candle light.

Conan dropped the sack and stood with his mouth agape, while nearby drinkers burst into raucous laughter.

"Crom and Mannanan!" the Cimmerian breathed at last. "This time, it seems, I was too clever for my own good." Then he bethought him of the jade serpent, still in the bag. "Well, I have something that will pay for a few good carousals, anyway."

Moved by curiosity, Semiramis picked up the sack from the table. Then she dropped it with a scream.

"It's—it's alive!" she cried.

"What—" began Conan, but a shout from the doorway cut him off:

"There he is, men! Seize him!"

A fat magistrate had entered the tavern, followed by a squad of the night watch, armed with bills. The other customers fell silent, staring woodenly into space as if they knew nothing of Conan or of any of the other riff-raff who were Abuletes' guests.

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The magistrate pushed toward Conan's table. Whipping out his sword, the Cimmerian put his back against the wall. His blue eyes blazed dangerously, and his teeth showed in the candle light.

"Take me if you can, dogs!" he snarled. "I've done nothing against your stupid laws!" Out of the side of his mouth, he muttered to Semiramis: "Grab the bag and get out of here. If they get me, it's yours."

"I—I'm afraid of it!" whimpered the woman.

"Oh-ho!" chortled the magistrate, coming forward. "Nothing, eh? Nothing but to rob our leading citizens blind! There's evidence enough to lop your head off a hundred times over! And then you slew Nestor's soldiers and persuaded him to join you in a raid on the ruins of Larsha, eh? We found him earlier this evening, drunk and boasting of his feat. The villain got away from us, but you shan't!"

As the watchmen formed a half-circle around Conan, bills pointing toward his breast, the magistrate noticed the sack on the table. "What's this, your latest loot? We'll see—"

The fat man thrust a hand into the sack. For an instant he fumbled. Then his eyes widened; his mouth opened to emit an appalling shriek. He jerked his hand out of the bag. A jade-green snake, alive and writhing, had thrown a loop around his wrist and had sunk its fangs into his hand.

Cries of horror and amazement arose. A watchman sprang back and fell over a table, smashing mugs and splashing liquors. Another stepped forward to catch the magistrate as he tottered and fell. A third dropped his bill and, screaming hysterically, broke for the door.

Panic seized the customers. Some jammed themselves into the door, struggling to get out. A couple started fighting with knives, while another thief, locked in combat with a watchman, rolled on the floor. One of the candles was knocked over; then another, leaving the room but dimly lit by the little earthenware lamp over the counter.

In the gloom, Conan caught Semiramis' wrist and hauled her to her feet. He beat the panic-stricken mob aside with the flat of his sword and forced his way through the throng to the door. Out in the night, the two ran, rounding several corners to throw off pursuit. Then they stopped to breathe. Conan said:

"This city will be too cursed hot for me after this. I'm on my way. Good-bye, Semiramis."

"Would you not care to spend a last night with me?"

"Not this time. I must try to catch that rascal Nestor. If the fool hadn't blabbed, the law would not have gotten on my trail so

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quickly. He has all the treasure a man can carry, while I ended up with nought. Maybe I can persuade him to give me half; if not—" He thumbed the edge of his sword.

Semiramis sighed. "There will always be a hideout for you in Shadizar, while I live. Give me a last kiss."

They embraced briefly. Then Conan was gone, like a shadow in the night.

On the Corinthian Road that leads west from Shadizar, three bowshots from the city walls, stands the fountain of Ninus. According to the story, Ninus was a rich merchant who suffered from a wasting disease. A god visited him in his dreams and promised him a cure if he would build a fountain on the road leading to Shadizar from the west, so that travelers could wash and quench their thirst before entering the city. Ninus built the fountain, but the tale does not tell whether he recovered from his sickness.

Half an hour after his escape from Abuletes' tavern, Conan found Nestor, sitting on the curbing of Ninus' fountain.

"How did you make out with your seven matchless gems?" asked Nestor.

Conan told what had befallen his share of the loot. "Now," he said, "since—thanks to your loose tongue—I must leave Shadizar, and since I have none of the treasure left, it would be only right for you to divide your remaining portion with me."

Nestor gave a barking, mirthless laugh. "My share? Boy, here is half of what I have left." From his girdle he brought out two pieces of gold and tossed one to Conan, who caught it. "I owe it to you for pulling me away from that falling wall."

"What happened to you?"

"When the watch cornered me in the dive, I managed to cast a table and bowl a few over. Then I picked up the bright stuff in my cloak, slung it over my back, and started for the door. One who tried to halt me I cut down, but another landed a slash on my cloak. The next thing I knew, the whole mass of gold and jewels spilled out on the floor, and everybody—watchmen, magistrate, and customers—joined in a mad scramble for them." He held up the cloak, showing a two-foot rent in the fabric. "Thinking that the treasure would do me no good if my head were adorning a spike over the West Gate, I left while the leaving was good. When I got outside the city, I looked in my mantle, but all I found were those two coins, caught in a fold. You're welcome to one of them."

Conan stood scowling for a moment. Then his mouth twitched into a grin. A low laugh rumbled in his throat; his head went back as he burst into a thunderous guf-

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faw. "A fine pair of treasure-seekers we are! Crom, but the gods have had sport with us! What a joke!"

Nestor smiled wryly. "I am glad you see the amusing side of it. But after this I do not think Shadizar will be safe for either of us."

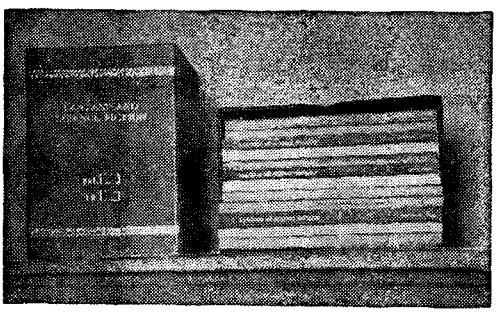
"Whither are you bound?" asked Conan.

"I'll head east, to seek a mercenary post in Turan. They say King Yildiz is hiring fighters to whip his raggle-taggle horde into a real army. Why not come with me, lad? You're cut out for a soldier."

Conan shook his head. "Not for me, marching back and forth on the drill ground all day while some fathead officer bawls: 'Forward, *march!* Present, *pikes!*' I hear there are good pickings in the West; I'll try that for a while."

"Well, may your barbarous gods go with you," said Nestor. "If you change your mind, ask for me in the barracks at Agrapur. Farewell!"

"Farewell!" replied Conan. Without further words, he stepped out on the Corinthian Road and soon was lost to view in the night.



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BOOKS

"ABOUT ONCE EVERY HUNDRED years some wiseacre gets up and tries to banish the fairy tale. Perhaps I had better say a few words in its defense . . .

"It is accused of giving children a false impression of the world they live in. . . . I think what profess to be realistic stories for children are far more likely to deceive them. I never expected the real world to be like the fairy tales. I think that I did expect school to be like the school stories. . . .

". . . the two longings are very different . . . a child does not long for fairy land as a boy longs to be the hero of the first eleven. Does anyone suppose that he really and prosaically longs for all the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale?—really wants dragons in contemporary England? It is not so. It would be much fairer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods; the reading makes all the woods a little enchanted. . . ."

C. S. Lewis speaking, in a paper prepared for the British Library Association in 1952, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," one of thirteen assorted selections—essays, lectures, an interview, an introduction, a polemic, three short stories, five chapters of an unfinished novel—related only by (the masterful prose and) a common thread of interest expressed in the title: OF OTHER WORLDS*.

Two of the short stories were originally published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* ("The Shoddy Lands" and "Ministering Angels"). A third, "Forms of Things Unknown," appears for the first time in this collection. I will not discuss them here, beyond advising readers who have somehow never read any of Lewis' fiction, to do so. I am in fact constrained

*OF OTHER WORLDS, C. S. Lewis; Harcourt Brace & World, 1967; Bles, London, 16s.

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from discussion by Lewis' own urgent argument in the lecture, "On Science Fiction," also published for the first time in this volume. He assails the contemptuous criticism of s-f by people who neither know it nor enjoy it: "Who wants to hear a particular claret abused by a fanatical teetotaller, or a particular woman by a confirmed misogynist?" My own attitude is nowhere so extreme, but I confess I rarely find Lewis' fiction as effective as his writing *about* fiction (or almost anything else). I am, however, in a minority, and the chances are you will enjoy the stories more than I do. As for the rest—

In addition to the paper on science fiction and three pieces dealing with children's books and/or fairy tales, there is a charming one-page introduction to one of his own children's books (THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE, in the Narnian series), called "It all Began with a Picture . . ." and an angry "Reply to Professor Haldane" (also previously unpublished), defending the trilogy, OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET, PERELANDRA, and THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH, against Haldane's criticisms—and in the process providing a fascinating insight into the author's mind. "On Criticism" is another lecture appearing here in print for the first time. Although it addresses itself specifically to the author/critic, on how to "improve himself as a critic by reading the criticisms of his own work," it is as cogent a commentary on the purpose and function of literary criticism as I can recall, and should be required reading for authors *and* critics both. "Unreal Estates" is the taped discussion between Lewis, Brian Aldiss, and Kingsley Amis, recorded for publication in *S.F. Horizons 2*, shortly before Lewis' death, a piece probably familiar by now to many *F&SF* readers.

My own favorite of them all is the opening selection, "On Stories," originally published as a contribution to the 1947 volume, ESSAYS PRESENTED TO CHARLES WILLIAMS (Oxford University Press), in which Lewis expresses with unique clarity and comprehension, the essential *virtu* of all the many kinds of story that make up "s-f."

Speaking of Wells' WAR OF THE WORLDS: ". . . if the Martian invaders are merely dangerous—if we once become mainly concerned with the fact that they can *kill* us—why then, a burglar or a bacillus can do as much . . . *extra-terrestrial* is the key word of the whole story. . . ."

On the ending of KING SOLOMON'S MINES: "In reading that chapter of the book, curiosity or suspense about the escape of the heroes from their death-trap makes a very minor part of one's experi-

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ence. The trap I remember forever; how they got out I have long since forgotten."

On Lindsay's VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS: "No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realise that idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp in a story about journeying through space: you must go into another dimension. . . ."

And, again (in 1947, remember): "If some fatal progress of applied science ever enables us in fact to reach the Moon, that real journey will not at all satisfy the impulse which we now seek to gratify by writing such stories. The real Moon, if you could reach it and survive, would in a deep and deadly sense, be just like anywhere else. . . . Death would be simply death among those bleached craters as it is simply death in a nursing home at Sheffield. No man would find an abiding strangeness on the Moon unless he were the sort of man who could find it in his own back garden. . . ."

Or: (An imaginative story) "may not be 'like real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region." And on the durability of stories: "The re-reader is looking not for actual surprises (which can only come once) but for a certain surprisingness. . . . It is the *quality* of unexpectedness, not the *fact,* that delights us."

Re-readability is, of course, the test for anything, but under certain circumstances it becomes too severe a test. Since the time, a year ago, when I filled this column with my own personal Discovery of England, I have been trying to keep up with s-f publishing in both countries, and have been developing an acute case of double-image vision in the process. I write, at the moment, from London, where some of the more interesting new books this season include William Tenn's TIME IN ADVANCE, Frederik Pohl's ALTERNATING CURRENTS, Kate Wilhelm's ANDOVER AND THE ANDROID, and Donald Barthelme's COME BACK, DR. CALIGARI. (Last winter saw the first London publication of a critical volume not to be confused with the C. S. Lewis book, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's 20-year-old OF WORLDS BEYOND.)

The time gap tends to be narrower crossing the ocean westward. Most British books appear in the U.S. within six months or a year, if they appear at all; but, for instance, there is E. J. Carnell's series of anthologies of original stories, NEW WRITINGS IN S.F. 1*

*NEW WRITINGS IN SF 1, E. J. Carnell, ed.; Bantam F3425, 1966; 147 pp., five stories; 50¢.

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The ninth volume has just appeared here, and the second is either just out, or just about to be, in New York. (As it has worked out, I have read the first two of these, and the seventh and ninth: Number Seven is outstanding, with two good-average entries by James White and R. W. Mackelworth, three superior jobs by William F. Temple, John Rankine, and Robert Presslie, and two genuinely memorable stories, Keith Roberts' "Manscarer" and "The Man who Missed the Ferry" by Douglas R. Mason. Keep an eye out for the Bantam edition.)

It is not just time-lag that creates my problem, but title twisting. There are books like Ballard's TERMINAL BEACH(es) for instance: two short story collections, only partially overlapping in content, one in each country. or, the other way round, Brian Aldiss' new (American) collection, WHO CAN REPLACE A MAN?* which is identical with BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES OF BRIAN W. ALDISS, published in London last year.

Which brings me back around to the matter of re-readability. Although the Aldiss volume is a selection rather than collection, covering his first eleven years of short story publishing (1954-1965), four, at least, of the fourteen stories have never been published in the U.S., and two of these, as well as two others, were new to me. Of the ten I had previously read, I was impressed to find myself rereading almost all with fresh interest—and at the same time disturbed to realize that with the exceptions of "Psyclops" and "Old Hundredth," everything I first read more than two or three years ago *was* fresh: I did not so much remember the stories, as remember having read them.

This is not true for all of Aldiss' works; there is a rich assortment of titles I still recall in wide-vision, full-color mentascope, even without the aid of a refresher collection. There is another author with whom I have experienced this sort of thing, and there are probably a good many parallels to be drawn between Aldiss and Theodore Sturgeon. Certainly Aldiss is one of the very few others who can tell an essentially unimportant story so well that I enjoy it just as much after I've forgotten it. Nor is this simple "story-telling" facility: it is (in both authors) a brightness of imagery, a warmth of empathy, a *caring* about even the most insignificant character, that communicates itself to the reader intact (. . . the sort of man who *can* find it in his own back garden . . .).

*WHO CAN REPLACE A MAN?, Brian W. Aldiss; Harcourt Brace & World, 1966; 253 pp., 14 stories; $4.50.

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And of course—again for both authors—when they get hold of something solid in a story, it is *entirely* memorable. Thus, from this volume, I think I will recall "Not for an Age," "Dumb Show," and "Man on Bridge" (which also appears in the first volume of Carnell's NEW WRITINGS) as vividly ten years from now as I still do the two titles mentioned above. A high percentage, after all, particularly from a collection selected by the author himself.

Unfortunately, the *new* (in London) Aldiss collection, THE SALIVA TREE AND OTHER STRANGE GROWTHS, about which I could be much less reservedly enthusiastic, is not yet scheduled for American publication at all (except of course for the title story, in NEBULA AWARDS), and there seems to be some question about the idea of reviewing British-only books for this column. *If* I were reviewing it, I would point out that seven of these ten stories have never been published in the U.S. in any form, and that three of them ("The Source," "Paternal Care," and most especially "The Day of the Doomed King"—all 1965-66 stories) are among the best things Aldiss has ever done.

While I'm at it—*if* I could review it, I would be devoting a good part of this space also to a fascinating mixture of science, philosophy, civilized sanity, and Fortean oddities just published in London by Museum Press: C. Maxwell Cade's OTHER WORLDS THAN OURS. But with this, as with SALIVA TREE, I can hope that some alert American publisher will shortly provide the opportunity for fuller discussion.

And possibly it is just as well that my enthusiasm for those two is limited to non-reviewing at the moment, since there are also at hand a small stack of novels of British origin, all worthy of some mention, and all recently published in the U.S.

William F. Temple's SHOOT AT THE MOON* is a good solid mainline astronaut adventure, with an intriguing grouping of not quite credible but entertaining characters, a few scenes on the Moon that gave me genuine chills, and a fast enough, smooth enough pace so I read straight through.

John Brunner's THE LONG RESULT* is a bit disappointing after THE WHOLE MAN and THE SQUARES OF THE CITY: a touch of preachiness, perhaps, which may be responsible too for the feeling that the tempo is a bit *off*. But the basic idea, as usual, is solidly thought through, and interestingly developed. A thriller of

*SHOOT AT THE MOON, **William F. Temple**; Simon & Schuster, 1966; 249 pp.; $4.50.

*THE LONG RESULT, **John Brunner**; Ballantine U2329, 1966; 190 pp.; 50¢.

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sorts, I suppose, with a hero employed by Earth's (interstellar) Bureau of Cultural Relations exposing the vicious "The Stars Are For Man" League.

Harry Harrison's MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!,* is included in this listing because (like his last two novels) it was first published in England, is a good fast-paced colorful book, offering a somewhat fresh approach to the overpopulation theme. I found Harrison's premises rather shaky, but the reasoning and plotting built on them very solid; the end did not quite sustain my interest, but the central part of the book was strong enough to make me entirely forget my quibbles with the underlying hypothesis. The writing and characterization are back to Harrison's usual standard (back from last year's disastrous PLAGUE FROM SPACE). Good reading.

L. P. Davies' THE PAPER DOLLS* is published as a mystery, and I suppose it is one—but more in the mood of Margery Allingham than any of the sixties-thrillers: some very convincing English countryside, and a modernized-Gothic plot with mutant telepaths, superstitious farmers, remote-control murders, and some first-rate story-telling that carries you through the improbabilities.

INNER CIRCLE*, by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, is difficult to describe briefly. Three narratives are interwoven: *Surface* is a future world, featureless except for the Hygiene Boxes, squashingly populated, in which the "inner circle" consists of the narrator, his two wives and two adopted brothers, linked in a whirling circle to maintain a spot of empty space to call their own under the pressure of seething thousands all around them; *Underground* is a present-time story of social and emotional dislocation—the "inner circle" is the Circle Line of the London Underground; *Sky* is the story of Eve's last years, after Eden, and the "inner circle" is part of the magic sign distinguishing humanity from the beasts. The three narratives interrelate only—only?—on a symbolic level. The book is lavishly and wittily illustrated by F. N. Souza, and I am not quite certain whether it was the text or the drawings that affected me most. I am not even certain it is a good book: only that it fascinated me, and continues to echo in my mind. Not for the prudish.

—JUDITH MERRIL

*MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!, Harry Harrison; Doubleday, 1966; 213 pp.; $3.95.
*THE PAPER DOLLS, L. P. Davies; Doubleday Crime Club, 1966; 216 pp.; $3.95.
*INNER CIRCLE, Jerzy Peterkiewicz; Macmillan of London, 1966; 185 pp.; 36s.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

WHO CAN REPLACE A MAN?, Brian W. Aldiss; Harcourt, Brace & World 1966; 253 pp.; $4.50; 14 stories (reviewed on page 27)

SCIENCE FICTION FOR PEOPLE WHO HATE SCIENCE FICTION, Terry Carr, ed.; Doubleday 1966; 190 pp.; $3.95; 9 stories

CLARET, SANDWICHES, AND SIN, Madelaine Duke; Doubleday 1966; 192 pp.; $3.95

FROM CARTHAGE THEN I CAME, Douglas R. Mason; Doubleday 1966; 190 pp.; $3.95

EARTHBLOOD, Keith Laumer and Rosel George Brown; Doubleday 1966; 253 pp.; $4.50

VICTORY ON JANUS, Andre Norton; Harcourt, Brace & World 1966; 224 pp.; $3.75

GENERAL

FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN, Isaac Asimov; Doubleday 1966; 208 pp.; $4.50 (17 science essays, all of which appeared originally in this magazine)

VOICES PROPHESYING WAR, I. F. Clarke; Oxford University Press 1967; 254 pp.; $10.00; illus., index

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR ESP POWER, Jane Roberts; Frederick Fell 1966; 264 pp.; $4.95

PAPERBACKS

SCIENCE FICTION ODDITIES, Groff Conklin, ed.; Berkley 1966; 256 pp.; 75¢ (19 stories)

THIEF OF LLARN, Gardner Fox; Ace 1966; 158 pp.; 40¢

THE EYES OF HEISENBERG, Frank Herbert; Berkley 1966; 158 pp.; 50¢

ORBIT 1, Damon Knight, ed.; Berkley 1966; 192 pp.; 50¢ (9 stories)

THE SUNDERED WORLDS, Michael Moorcock; Paperback 1966; 159 pp.; 50¢

ALL FLESH IS GRASS, Clifford D. Simak; Berkley 1966; 224 pp.; 60¢

QUEST OF THE THREE WORLDS, Cordwainer Smith; Ace 1966; 174 pp.; 40¢

SKYLARK DUQUESNE, E. E. Smith; Pyramid 1966; 238 pp.; 60¢

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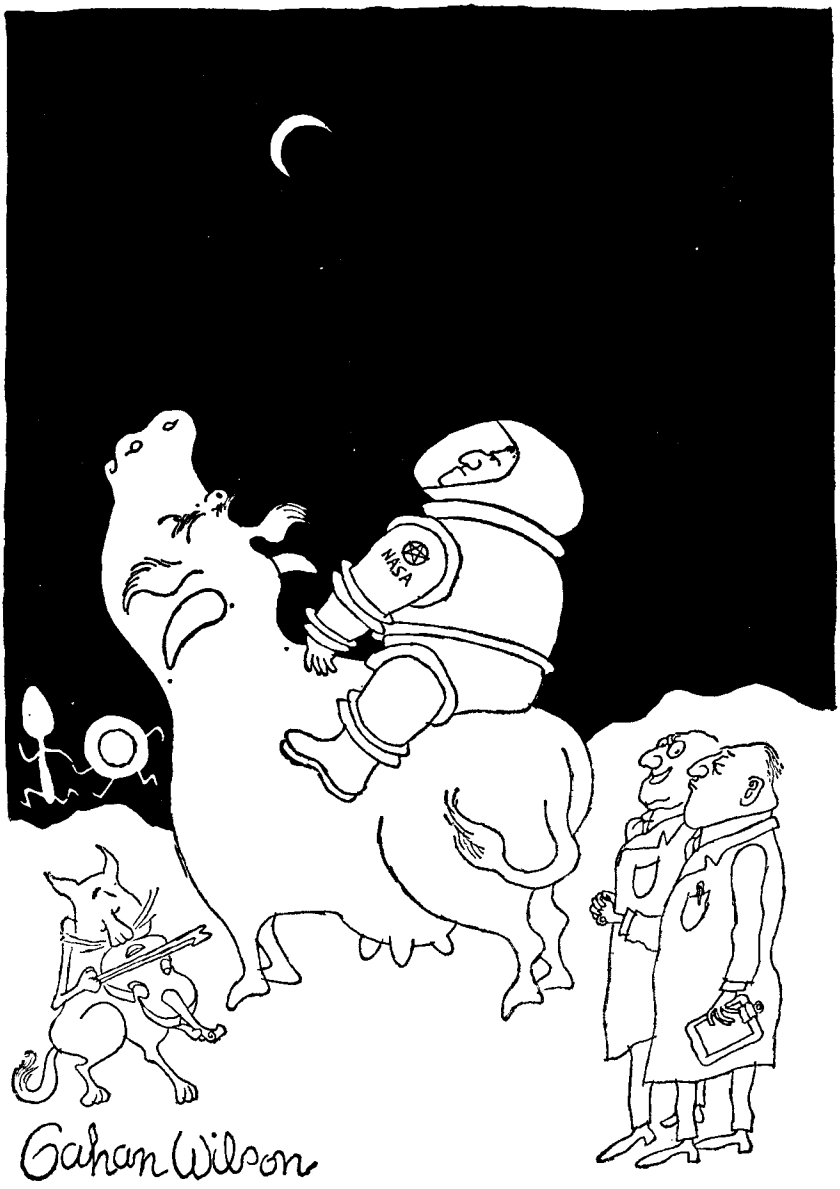

"You can tell she's thinking it over."

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"A WALK IN THE WET is yours unconditionally," said Dennis Etchison, "so long as you say something nice about singer Ruth Price in your introduction." Okay, she's nice. Which seems a painless enough price to pay in order to get the fine story you are about to read, about a man who has survived a deep-space collision, but who will never forget the horror.

A WALK IN THE WET

by Dennis Etchison

THE LETTERS BURNED WARM in the night:

cold
BEER
o
n
t
a
p

Spane's labored *thump-slide, thump-slide* rhythm carried him closer to the alley that stretched out behind the sign. He stopped only long enough to rub his gnarled hand once over the half-inch growth of beard on his face and to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. A man on crutches must learn to make a hundred such moves every day of his life, but for Spane it came to be a battle by this time of night, complicated by the amount of wine he had consumed, and the fact that he had only one crutch with which to maneuver, and one hand. But he moved ahead. He clenched his teeth, echoing his determination with rheumy clatter from within the hollowed and sunken cavern of his chest, and moved ahead.

He had his job to do and, by God, he would do it.

As he passed under the sign, the letters reflected a liquid sanguineness over his glistening features and the glistening surface of

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the pavement and its oily, rainbow-streaked puddles. He looked grimly down at his clenched hand and saw in its perspiring ridges a blurred reflection the color of watery, gritty blood, and in the greasy clockwork springs of the white hairs curling on his corded arm a glow as if from the inner heat of a moving piston.

"Hey, old guy!"

The lights of passing cars at the end of the alley streaked the street, casting long, deep shadows toward him along the rows of garbage cans that lined the backs of the buildings.

And then suddenly a shadow moved.

Spane felt his shoulder lurch reflexively as he moved to put his other hand to his forehead, but it was not there. *Damn,* he muttered silently somewhere behind the sweetsour breath and the churning waters of his consciousness. But his body would never forget, and he knew it. He would die reaching for something that was not there with an arm that no longer existed.

Except in the black spaces of his memory.

"Hey, you!"

He squeezed his eyes shut, the perspiration dripping down from the creases like dirty tears. *Concentrate.* He had to know. He had come this far—almost three miles across the city on foot—and now he had to know.

The shadow sprang out from the wall between two garbage cans; the old man slitted his eyes for an instant to see the batlike figure waving its arms in silhouette.

He clenched his eyes like fists. He had to be sure! The glimmer had been faint all across the city and now, if he was right, if he had found him at last, he would feel a spark struck in the special place beyond the backbrain where he always felt it when he was right, and then he would *know.*

"HEY!"

A hand grabbed him.

He shuddered, attempting to shake it off. I must not lose this thought! His trembling cheeks protested before his lips could form the words. *I must—not lose—it now!*

"Awrr, old man."

A sliding shuffle scraped to a stop at his back, and the clammy, meaty hand gripped his neck.

Spane's fist raged up from its hold on the crutch and shook at the night in front of his brow, and he bellowed a guttural animal roar deep in his throat.

The old woman lumbered around into full view as he staggered for the crutch grip again, her hand never leaving his neck, steadying him.

There was a shivering of flesh as his face rescinded, the painful ungluing of eyes to what now filled his vision, and the sound of automobile horns in the city streets

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beyond the alley. His breath labored into resignation.

"You made me *lose* it!" he growled.

"Come on."

The woman's hulking body turned and the meaty hand and the neck it held turned with it, blocking from his eyes the shadow in the alley.

He was aware that he was being led up the cracked stone steps of a back entrance to the bar, and now the woman's pungent rottenness enveloped him, overpowering even the smell of his own rotgut breath. But he knew the sickening sweet smells of the bar as well as if they were his own, and he did not think of the creaking floorboards of the hallway down which she navigated him, nor of her intentions, for he knew them full well, and these were things that were of no importance to him. He thought, with an overwhelming and brutal melancholy, only of his prey, what had been left behind to escape in the alley.

She prodded him to the left, then right along the corridor that smelled faintly of urine, and left again and pushed him down into the wooden chair.

"No-ow." She rolled into her sagging chair across the table from him, the rickety door slamming closed seemingly from the current of air she stirred as she moved to settle. "Tell me about them rockets . . . and people."

Spane felt the joints of his back crack as he straightened to protest, and to leave, but then he let his body subside and decided to go along with her, at least for a while. He saw her paw inside her distended sweater for the bottle. He heard the giggle of female voices from the rooms nearby, and the rhythmic din of electro-rock from the floor below, and he sighed into his filthy arm and the stained wooden table on which it rested. She was too big to fight. He closed his eyes and felt his mind reeling backwards in space end over end as the wine resurged through his quieted body. But he caught himself in time. When he looked up, Zenna was filling the plastic tumblers in front of her. He knew, however, that he must not take any more to drink tonight; not until he had done what he had come all this way to do. He would wait, pretending to drink with her, until she dropped off to sleep as she always did, and then he would make his way back down the stairs. . . .

"Well?"

She sloshed a glass of cheap bourbon into his hand. Catching the sudden smell in his nostrils like a whiff of fermenting candy, he started to push himself up from the table. At the same time his eyes were caught, as his head turned, by a view of the night sky from the second story window. And there were the stars. He had an instant

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recollection of the way the stars had looked from the *Deneb,* and he blinked, feeling himself relax to the notion of telling her, of telling anyone, what it had been like. Saturn: standing on Minas, her rings cutting the sky. Or what it was like on Deimos. Or Phobos.

But he knew that she did not want to hear of these things, nor did she want to hear about the rockets, not really. . . . And people, she had said. That was what she always said. No matter how many times he spoke to her of the wreck she never grew tired of hearing it over and over: the collision cutting the two ships almost in half, and the survivors wriggling free in space and spinning out to drift like cosmic cartwheels in all directions while their oxygen was used up slowly and they were swept toward some unthinkable alien sun. The ones with space suits, that is. What she liked most to hear, he knew, was the way the other less fortunate ones fared in that horrible instant when the protective fabric of the ships was rent apart and the night rushed in too soon to meet them. . . . That was what she wanted to hear, all right, and he felt a new wave of nausea warp through his entire body.

He sat down, his eyes searching the street below as a single thought returned to take the place of this room, this travesty of a woman.

He had not forgotten.

He gazed at her tiredly. Already she was pouring another glassful for herself.

"Here, drink yer hap'ness." When he did not move, she tossed her medusa head in the direction of his empty shoulder, which was nearer to the glass than his right arm. "Ya really oughta get that fixed, ya know."

His bloodshot eyes narrowed. From beneath the floorboards drifted the pulse of the dance music, and Zenna's foot began to throb against the floor in an insistent counter rhythm of its own. Yeah, he thought bitterly, mockingly, I oughta get it fixed—but why? His lips curled back over his ragged teeth. "Why-can't-you-just-let-me-alone!" he said, as much to her as to the old aching that he felt now where his arm should be. He winced in pain, remembering for a mercifully brief but vivid flash just what it had been like, swinging free of the *Deneb,* his lifeline drifting out and away with the torn shard of his arm still gripped to it as his suit sealed itself off and his eyes bulged behind his faceplate in unimaginable horror; and all the while he was sinking into unconsciousness, the seconds impaling him for eternities on the rays of the glaring twin sun, hearing across the soundlessness of space the soul-deaths of the 130 others, screaming silently the agony of the dying, screaming

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inside his own mutant skull. (They had not known when they took him on, the US Space Force, of his mother's passing through the Hallendorf Barrier on the way to Venus Base in her seventh month, nor of the finger-like projection that had been thus stimulated into development at the back of his brain. Later, when random children were discovered in their wild talent, the mutated telepower lobe would be named, the Barrier declared off-limits "pending further study," and the doctors would begin their futile attempt to trace the tens of thousands of children born on the Base; now, with a second generation imminent, they would allow their memories to weaken. But not Spane, he knew the curse and he would not forget them.) His shoulder nerves spasmed as he thought for the billionth time in 20 years, get it fixed—I got no right to get it fixed! I can't let myself forget, not even for a minute—

And just then, he felt a spark struck somewhere behind his backbrain, and he knew he would never be able to forget. Not even if he wanted to.

"Awrr, old one, you're a vet'ran . . . ya know the gov'ment'll pay to restore that ol' arm o' yours. Why dontcha . . ."

Spane jammed his eyes shut.

It hit him.

Now he was no longer trying to concentrate, but to bear the screeching signal as it pierced the back of his head.

He had found it, all right. The other's presence was so intense—

". . . git yourself . . ."

His chin pressed against his chest as the mental probe pressed deeper, an ultra-frequency only he could hear, then subsided. But the other's involuntary signal had been received. His head and mind reeled back up to the surface. He was aware once again of the rocking beat below his feet.

". . . fixed back up good as new."

The words the woman was saying, which would have angered him a moment ago, now buzzed meaninglessly in his ears.

He gripped the corner of the table between his thumb and forefinger and pushed his chair back, flailing for his crutch.

"Naw, you, you'd rather go on feelin' sorry fer yourself."

She swooned drunkenly over the circle her rolling eyes circumscribed on the table, her thick fingers slipping listlessly up and down her glass.

He dug his crutch into the boards and moved toward the door.

"No-ow, jus' wait a minute here, you ain't finished yet."

He fumbled the door open.

"You ain't even begun. . . . You haveta tell me 'bout them *people.*" Her face contorted in misshapen folds of flesh. "Yeah! That's what I wanna hear. I wanna hear

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'bout all them pret-ty people swimmin' 'round in the dark like fish . . ." Her glass tipped over.

He was halfway out the door. She rolled to her feet and lunged, groping unsteadily. Her overstuffed arms struggled to fit between the edge of the door and the wall, and as she lurched forward for the last time it was only her oversized head that emerged into the hall.

Bracing himself against the wall he growled and swung his crutch up, pointing it at her. His jaws parted and he snarled his warning:

"ZENNA!"

She huffed at him. Her attention floundered then as did her body, crouching close to the floor.

"Yeah. Who needs ya. Yer an ol' bum, anyway. You was prob'ly never no rocket jockey anyhow. Yeah."

He turned as she spat at him and hunched his way down the stairs.

"Yeah." Her rasp withdrew into the room. "The hell with ya!" And as the door slammed she threw up one last oath:

"Some spacer . . . Hell!"

He lowered his head, breathing heavily, and made for the back door.

There were two young servicemen who passed him, led from the bar by two girls who wanted them to climb the stairs.

Spane did not glance up but continued to scowl down at his own progress until he was bumped into deliberately.

"Well look who came back for more," sang one of the girls above the blare of the synthetic music. She stuck out her hip and propped her hand on it, then shifted insolently, folding her arms over her immodest breasts. "It's Spame the lame!"

"C'mon, Rena," said the other girl, pulling at her young man.

Spane noted the USSF insignia on their uniforms and felt an echo of kinship, melancholy and finally pity stir within him.

"Aw, how 'bout some lovin', Spame the lame? I'll bet you taught Zenna a thing or two with that crutch of yours . . ."

The girl threw herself at him, mouthing vulgar sounds, pretending to offer her arms and the cheap fragrances that exuded from her gaudy professional's dress.

He felt revulsion, and a bitter thankfulness that he had conditioned himself to block off her thoughts and Zenna's and the thoughts of all the others, of the masses of non-telepaths around him. It had taken years, but his brain had had to grow a callus to protect itself after that horror of consciousness, floating with the wreckage in the Mars-Jupiter asteroid belt and receiving each wrenching pain, each death as though it were his own. But never again.

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He shrugged her off with his strong right arm and shouldered his way outside.

The girls' laughter and the cacophony of dance rhythms faded, as he heard again the swishing of automobiles along the wet streets. A wind hit him as he felt mist settle in his eyebrows. He swayed.

And there.

There in the dark he saw a movement.

He took a step.

Thump-slide.

Suddenly there was the sound of a trash can overturning.

Spane focused his mind.

Something jumped out in the alley, silhouetted in the headlights of a passing car.

aaahhhhh

Spane's mind constricted. This, the signal of a mind like his own, he could not shut out.

aaayahhh

He pulled himself forward a step at a time. He strained his eyes against the dark, and then—

Swish.

—another car passed in the street and there for an instant, reflecting pinpoints of light were the wide and terrified eyes of—

Thump-slide.

God, thought Spane, the eyes, they're so small this time.

The figure froze like a startled cat as their eyes locked, then bolted.

Wait.

He said it with his mind.

Thump-slide.

Thump-slide.

It was only a boy, of not more than eight or nine. See, Spane thought. He saw the stealthy movements like those of a frightened cat, a supersensitive creature with senses so acute that he has learned to avoid people, cruel people with their vicious, stabbing thoughts.

The boy gazed up at him, confused. The fur collar on his jacket was turned up over his ears and in one mittened hand he clutched the rubber ball he had been playing with. His mouth opened but he made no sound, clearly uncertain what to do as he faced another like himself for the first time in his young life.

Do not be afraid.

See, thought Spane, already he has found that he must avoid the streets, the crowds, his own house and the thoughtless thinking people in it. But does he know yet what it will be like? Every day there is a fire, a crash on a nearby highway, the agony of a drunken lovers' quarrel that ends in a knifing or worse, every time a man is beaten and dumped bleeding in just such an alley as this . . . or a baby dies screaming in a scalding tub, or is born . . . every time, every time he will be that person. He will know before he is fourteen what it feels like for a man to suffer so much he begs to be killed so that there can be an end to it. And he will not be able

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to stop it. He might one day teach himself to shut his mind, but that would take years and years and years. And by then he may have gone mad.

The boy looked up at him, a flicker of a smile playing over his chill lips.

Hey mister, he thought, *you wanna play with me?*

Spane stood thinking, He does not know what he is. If he did he would kill himself.

Then, feeling an almost unbearable weariness in his bones, he moved his hulking body close to the boy.

He held a breath for a long, very long minute.

Then.

He raised his crutch in the night, and brought it down as hard as he could, as many times as he could.

And, presently, the boy's thoughts—were over.

Spane turned his face to the night sky. He felt his teeth chattering, grinding together. And this one, he thought, this one, too.

And then, the swishing of the traffic sounding so far away to him that it was like the tides going out on some unseen shore, and leaving the light from the distant and inconceivably indifferent stars to reflect through the drizzle onto the wet pavement and the unmoving shape he left lying there, Spane went home.

ABOUT THE COVER

This month's cover by Chesley Bonestell depicts Zeta Aurigae, a gigantic red star 200 million miles in diameter, and its smaller hot blue companion, about 3 million miles in diameter. In the foreground is the wreckage of a ship which has attempted to land on a satellite of the double star. The astronauts have been mummified as their bodies dehydrated in the vacuum of outer space; the nuclear reactor still glows amidst the wreckage.

Two striking new cover paintings by Bonestell have recently arrived in our offices—one depicting Mars, the other the Trifid Nebula. They will be appearing soon. (If you would like to acquire full color proofs without overprinting of this month's cover or covers of back issues, see page 112.)

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E. A. (Edward Albert) Moore writes that he spent his youth "in many small Ohio towns, rural schools, bare feet and buck teeth, reading Heinlein in the hayloft, cornfields and apple trees, and dreams of inventing anti-gravity." We do not have room for the rest of the colorful chronicle, but Mr. Moore has since been a playwright ("no money"), a radio TV copywriter ("lotsa money"), an English teacher, and now is writing constantly. This is his first story for F&SF, a good one about the last desperate effort for survival on an Earth choked by mankind.

THE NEXT STEP

by E. A. Moore

THE PROTON BOILED UPWARD in the geyser of raw energy. A hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand miles into space it soared. Then, in company with many more of its kind, it broke free and streaked on while the tendril of searing gasses that had carried it aloft curled and fell back into the inferno.

Light years away another particle, much larger than the proton but still only a particle compared to the infinity in which it travelled, made a slight course correction.

Now the lines of flight of the two particles were perfectly aligned for a head-on collision.

Although many of its travelling companions were detained, deflected, drawn away toward other eternities, the proton whizzed on unswervingly.

Nor did the larger particle, a shining, silver globe, alter its course again, for it was guided from within and impervious to the forces that had thinned the proton's ranks.

And the silver sphere, unlike the proton, had a very specific destination. It was going home.

Months and months, and millions of millions of miles went by; and the collision took place.

Soundlessly. Unceremoniously.

And the sphere passed on, unchanged, except for the proton which had come to rest some-

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where within, as had so very, very many others before it.

The dizziness made it difficult for Tink to finish the count, but she kept at it, recorded her findings, and leaned back to stare disconsolately at the microscope.

The doors behind her flew open with a familiar bang.

"Anyone for a cup of coffee?"

Tink swiveled her nose up to be kissed. "Coffee? No steak tonight?"

Dr. Brit Keogh planted the upside-down kiss, then perched on the lab bench. "Aw, I just lasered out half of some poor spacedog's vital organs and kind of lost my appetite."

"Yours! Think how he feels."

"Oh, he'll be fine. Gave him a whole new set of guaranteed-forever, duraplastic guts."

Tink rubbed her temples. Her head was still spinning. She decided she had to catch up on her sleep.

"You all right, hon?" asked Brit.

"What? Oh, yeah. Just tired. And I wish things were that simple down here." Tink sighed.

"Problems?"

Tink nodded at the microscope.

"Oi, bad news," squinted Brit, studying the smear. "Whose blood?"

"Mother's."

"Huh?"

Tink stepped across the lab to a control panel and thumbed a switch. The wall in front of her glowed, then vanished, and the lab suddenly seemed to have an annex. It was an illusion of the video monitoring system she had activated, but it was as close as any human could get to the special research ward she had selected.

"Mother" was on the ceiling as usual, looking about as healthy as a pregnant chimpanzee should.

"Oh! Yeah, I forgot about your menagerie down here," said Brit, watching with amusement as the chimp cavorted in the ceiling grid. Then he frowned.

"But wait a minute! She should be dead."

"That's one of my problems." Tink shrugged.

Brit peered into the microscope again. "This looks like a post-mortem sample. The white cells practically spell it out like a theatre marquee: Galloping Leukemia. You sure this blood came from that chimp?"

"I've double checked it a dozen times. Even had the remobot handling system replaced in case the samples got switched somehow between here and Mother's ward."

"Let me have a look at her," said Brit, joining Tink at the control panel and inserting his hands in the glove-like remobot attachments.

In the research ward the chimpanzee noticed the mechanical

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hands come to life and dropped to the floor near them.

"Don't extend. She'll come to you," coached Tink.

Mother was a little hesitant since the hands sometimes pricked her with needles. But they also fed her and even took time out to play with her now and then. Noticing nothing suspicious in their grasp this time, she finally sidled up to be petted.

Brit examined the animal with practiced skill between rounds of sparring and wrestling with her.

"This is impossible. She should at least be helplessly weak, but just look at her. Even the pregnancy seems stable."

Tink shrugged and wandered away to hang up her smock. Brit shut off the monitor wall and watched her with concern. Then he clapped his hands brusquely.

"Vell now, Doctor Bell, I tink you got a real tvisty-turny shtinker uff a problem here. Iss only vun zolution!"

"What's that?" grinned Tink.

"Shteak! Shteak! Vat else?" cried Brit, bustling her out of the lab.

"But I thought you weren't . . ."

"The shortest way to a scientist's stomach is through his curiosity. I want to hear all about this nutty monkey. And besides, you need a break yourself. You look worse than your chimp ought to. C'mon, let's head for Chauncey's."

Tink felt worlds better as the express belt whisked them up out of Westcoast.

"Couple centuries ago people ran *to* the cities to have a good time. Now we try to run from them."

The evening rush was at its peak. The highbelt they were on was heavily laden with exurb commuters and straining along at well under its normal, hundred-mile-per-hour speed. The lowbelts teemed with even greater throngs, and far below, the streets themselves were a boiling nightmare, tinged with the deepening reds of the sunset.

"Looks like something out of Dante, doesn't it?" Brit said.

Tink nodded. "It's the pressure. The unrelenting press of human bodies. It's suffocating."

"I know. And we still have so damn far to go on Starleap . . ."

"How far, Brit? Are we getting anywhere at all? How long before we can start doing something about this mess?"

Brit gazed out at the jungle of soaring towers that was the megalopolis Westcoast sprawling as far as the eye could see north and south. There was no end to it. To the east stretched endless tracts of highrise apartment buildings. And it was like this everywhere. The sun didn't shine on the ground anymore, anywhere on earth. Only on roofs, and people. Too many people. Mankind himself was a cancer, devouring the planet.

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"Who knows? We're only just getting started. And even when, and if, we do solve The Problem, and build the ships, and start moving people, it'll take a long time to make much of a dent in the earth's population. I don't know. It's a big balloon, ready to pop any minute now. We're way out on a limb, way past the planet's capacity to feed and provide shelter for everyone. So we're farming Venus and hollowing out Mars and most of the other planets just to hold the line here. But pretty soon we'll have milked this whole solar system dry. And I just don't know if there's time. I don't even know if we're going at The Problem in the right way."

"Oh Brit. What else can we do? We've got to get out to the stars. And Starleap . . ."

"Is an ingenious answer, yes, but sometimes it just seems all wrong to me. To try to rebuild man, make him half machine. That's playing God. We're trying to take some kind of evolutionary shortcut, and it, well, it bugs me sometimes."

"But it'll just be the one generation. The one that makes the crossing. It's the only way we can get them through alive. Then, when they get to the New Earth, we go back to good old nature's way. Brit, that's not shortcutting evolution. It's just an expedient."

"We haven't even found a New Earth yet."

"Hey! What is this? I thought I was supposed to be the one with the blues."

"Humph! Yeah. What the heck are we talking shop for anyway?" snorted Brit. "And here comes our step-off, by the way. C'mon! Let's dance."

Tink had to hang on for dear life as Brit led the jig across the speed reduction belts. Loping treadmill-fashion against the motion of the belts, they pranced sideways until they landed, breathless and laughing, on solid ground.

A tiny echo rippled back along the laser's thread-like beam. Directional apparatus twitched minutely, locking the beam onto the cause of the echo, and an almost forgotten signal light on a vast instrument panel began winking.

A young technician, whose duty it was to keep a close watch on the instrument panel, didn't see the light. He had long since stopped looking in that direction, for those lights had been inactive for many, many years. And besides, there were plenty of other lights and dials and switches and whatnot to keep him occupied. It was a big job, monitoring all the space traffic in the solar system.

But then it wasn't tremendously important that the signal light be noticed right away anyway. The echo that had set it flashing in the first place would continue pulsing

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down along the laser beam whether anyone knew about it or not. The beam projector would automatically continue tracking the source of the echo until that source came plummeting in out of the great, black infinity it was traversing.

And, sooner or later, the technician would have to realize that the insistant glinting in the corner of his eye was not a tic.

The mob swirled mindlessly in the snow around the warehouse.

"Go home," boomed a voice over the loudspeakers. "You will be notified when the relief ships arrive. For now you must make do with what you have."

"Most of us don't have anything left!" shouted a woman. "It's been over a week. What's wrong?"

"We're not sure," answered the loudspeaker. "A slight mix-up at the distribution center. Nothing to get alarmed about. I know it's difficult, but there's nothing we can do."

"You still have reserve provisions in there!" roared a man with an ice axe in his hand.

"For emergencies, and the sick. It's too soon to think of going into our reserves. The relief ships are on their way."

"You've been saying that for days now! What's keeping them?"

"You know how bad the weather has been. Now please, all of you, go home. Be patient."

It began to snow again and within minutes a driving blizzard was in progress. The people huddled against the high fence surrounding the warehouse, refusing to leave.

"Oh, why did we ever come here?" sobbed an old woman.

"We all volunteered, dear," reminded her husband softly. "We wanted space, room to breath, to move around in."

"But they promised us plenty of food, and comfortable homes. A lot of us are even out of heating fuel!" grated the man with the axe.

"Why doesn't somebody do something!" screamed another.

An aircar appeared out of the howling sky and settled near the main gate, signalling for admittance. The man with the axe stood up, trembling.

"Stand clear of the gate," said the voice over the loudspeakers. "The colony director has just arrived and will speak to you."

The gate began to open, but the aircar remained where it was.

"What're you doing!" gasped the colony director as he was dragged out of the vehicle.

"Damnit, we're starving!" someone said. "We've had enough!"

"But you mustn't do this. You're starting something that . . !" pleaded the official.

His shouts were drowned by the screeching wind and the crash as his aircar was rammed into the gate, wedging it open.

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The mob surged forward.

"Well, we're in for it now," said Chauncey, clearing the table and spillingly serving coffee.

"What's that, Chaunce?" asked Brit.

"It just came over the radio. One of the Arctic colonies is having a hunger riot. You watch now. The lid's gonna come off all over the place. They're already starting over in Asia, the radio said. Open revolt, starving mobs looting whole cities, the whole smear."

"Oh, this kind of thing's happened before," said Tink. "I wouldn't worry."

"I got to, Dr. Bell. I'm in the food business. I don't know why. Everybody with sense is getting out, what with this kind of thing all the time, and the government taking over all the big distributing companies. Used to have a ball running this joint. Only problem was getting enough people to come in and eat. Now there's too many people, and the inventory police keep me from showing a profit. How were the steaks?"

"Great, as usual," smiled Brit. "I've always wondered how you manage the things. You have to know someone just to get one at a restaurant in town."

Chauncey shrugged. "I figured you knew. I grow my own beef. Only reason I built my place up here."

"You mean you actually have a ranch up here?"

"Sure. The last of the cattle barons, that's me," frowned Chauncey. "Would you believe I even have to fight off rustlers these days? But I've got the spread pretty well protected. You folks'll have to come up and spend a few days with us. It's mighty relaxing."

"We might just take you up on that, Chaunce, if we can ever get some time off."

"It's an open invitation. See that furthest peak?" Chauncey pointed out the window. "You'll need an aircar. No road. But head for that. High Eden's cradled between the two ridges up there."

"High Eden?"

"That's it. Make it soon."

Chauncey excused himself to take care of other customers, leaving the two scientists marvelling that such a place as his mountain retreat still existed on earth.

"Sounds fantastic," breathed Tink.

"Yeah," Brit said. "And speaking of fantastic, what about this chimpanzee? Feel like telling me what you're doing with her?"

"Oh, that. Do we have to now, Brit?"

"Honey, I'm the cop down there, y'know. As coordinator of research I've got to know what's going on in all departments. A pregnant chimp makes sense, but the blood cancer doesn't figure. You're supposed to be checking out our prosthetic reproduction units. So where'd the leukemia come from?"

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"I've been hitting Mother with a program of light radiation comparable to what a colonist would sustain in a deep space crossing. Mostly proton bombardment, to make it as true a test as possible. That must have triggered the leukemia just like the cancers that all our spacemen developed after long exposures."

"Well, you could have figured something like that would happen, if the chimp only has the artificial repro system."

"No, she's got everything. Total replacement, same as the star colonists will have. Blood producing glands, everything. Like I said, I wanted to run a really true test, while I was at it. No, Mother is an almost complete example, but the animal equivalent, of your 'rebuilt man.' She's a big step, Brit. If it weren't for the leukemia, she'd be living proof, along with her little one, that Starleap can work."

"Yeah, if . . ! But it looks like we've struck out again. We can't have all the star colonists coming up with leukemia when they get out there," grumbled Brit.

"Maybe you're forgetting something. Mother has it, and bad. Her blood's a mess. But she's still a ball of fire. You saw her. Figure that one out."

Brit shook his head. "Don't kid yourself. So maybe she's all right now, but it can't last. And the embryo's got to have cancerous blood, too. No, face it, hon. The test's a bust. Might as well scrub it. I'll want to have a look at those blood producing units, too, by the way. Let me know when you're ready, and I'll help you take her apart."

"Brit!" gasped Tink, "You're not ordering me to . . . to . . !"

"Honey, there's no use prolonging it. You know the rules. We can't afford any digression down there, especially now. Who knows how far this business in the Arctic and over in Asia is going to go. Remember what I said about the balloon? Well, maybe this is it, the beginning of the big bang."

"Oh, I know. That scares me, too, but to just write off Mother . . !"

"I won't make it an order, Tink, because it's you and me. But do it. I wouldn't be able to justify carrying it any further, if Director Matheson were to hear about it. Nor could you."

Tink scowled into her coffee for a long moment, then shook her head ruefully.

"It's odd. I admit I shudder to think of doing away with Mother for, well, unscientific reasons, but there's something else. Brit, I wish I could explain. I've got a really screwball idea niggling me about Mother."

"Well?"

"I don't dare try to put it into words, yet. Not yet. It's still too fuzzy, and too far out."

"Baby," sighed Brit, "I've got to have something to go on, or . . ."

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"Please, just a little longer, Brit!"

"Sweetheart, you know Matheson's going to be all over the place tomorrow, bellowing about moving ahead. These food riot things turn him on every time. And this one looks like the worst one yet."

"What's that got to do with Mother? I'm not taking food out of anyone's mouth."

"Ah, nuts! Tink, this may be it. The world could be starting to come apart at the seams, right now. And Starleap . . ."

"Okay, Brit. Okay," said Tink without emotion.

"I'm sorry, hon . . ."

Tink looked away. That same vague queasiness she had been trying to ignore for over a week now settled over her again. It seemed to get a little worse every time. She wondered whether it really was the long hours in the lab, or lack of sleep, and a sudden, ironic thought came to her that was more than a little terrifying. It took her breath away, and now she wondered if she dared find out what was wrong with her.

"Hey, uh, lady . . ?" prompted Brit in the aircab on the way to Tink's apartment.

"Um?"

"We still buddies?"

Tink pushed away the dark thoughts, forced a smile, and nodded.

"Care to prove it?" asked Brit.

"Okay," she answered, outside her door, kissing him briefly and whispering goodnight as she closed the door in his face.

"Goodnight, love!" she heard him chuckle as he moved off down the hall.

The amateur astronomer's heart skipped a beat, and he began to tremble with excitement as he pondered what he had just witnessed through his homemade telescope.

In a dark sector of space, where none had been an instant before, a star had blossomed into being.

Moisture formed on his palms. Was he viewing some dramatic celestial event such as a nova, or perhaps the birth of a comet?

Ah, yes, more likely a comet, for as the man watched he became aware of a very slight, but discernible motion relative to the background stars. And there was a hint of a tail . . !

Now the man really began to shake. What if he were first? What if he were the only one seeing this happen! It would be his! Immortality, his name, his comet!

"Huh!"

It was gone. It had vanished, winked off again just as it had appeared, like nothing so much as an electric light.

The poor man unglued his eye from the telescope with dismay. Profoundly confused, he stood and pondered a moment, rubbing the one eye while with the other he re-

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garded his recently completed instrument with suspicion.

Scowling, he bent to look again. Nothing. He scanned in the direction the mysterious flare had seemed to move, still saw nothing, and immediately straightened to begin disassembling the telescope.

Had he not been so quick to blame what he had seen on some tiny, crawling insect, or imperfection of lens or mirror, he might have been watching moments later when the puzzling spark reappeared. Then he might have watched all night long as it continued winking on and off at regular intervals during its transit, tracing a slow, neat dotted line in light across the heavens, like a lazy cosmic firefly.

It might then have occurred to him to measure the flare's intensity early in the evening, and then later. This would have resulted in the discovery that its brightness increased somewhat during transit, thereby suggesting that, whatever it was, it was approaching the Earth. And simple checks with a stopwatch would also have suggested that there was an obvious decelerating trend.

All this data might have been enough to jog his memory, but, like almost everyone else in the world, he had forgotten, or long since given up hope. So, even if he had continued watching through the night, he might not have guessed the truth.

There were many part-time stargazers who had sighted the thermo-nuclear flares, and of course everyone at Internasa knew by now that a starship was coming home. But, strangely enough, when the news broke, it didn't even make the headlines.

"What the devil's happening?" rumbled Director Matheson. "This is ridiculous!"

Brit had to shout to make himself heard, even though they were a hundred stories above the tumult in the streets.

"Mass hysteria! I don't know!"

"But why do they scream? They're all just milling around down there, shrieking their heads off. God, what a sound! Millions of them. Look, every street is jammed. Must be every last soul in Westcoast."

They stood on the heliport atop the space center building. The platform was crowded with Internasa people, most of them from the space medicine division which occupied the top twenty floors.

"At first I thought they were just whooping it up over the news about the Alpha C mission coming home. But this isn't a celebration. It's a . . . a dirge. Like an old Irish funeral, Mat. That's what they're doing. They're keening!"

It was a strange, hypnotic sound. Brit wanted to cover his ears but couldn't. He listened instead and heard mankind crying out in utter, mindless despair. A

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sudden recollection from his youth made him shudder with cold understanding as he realized why this was happening.

He had heard this sound before. He had made it himself once. There had been the usual boyhood urge to explore, and the narrow space between the two old buildings, and the horrifying realization when he had wriggled to where the tight passageway ended that he couldn't go back. He had screamed. And screamed and screamed.

Now here was humanity suddenly aware of its own, similar predicament. Stuck, wedged, hemmed in by itself on a planet that had become a tight space, too tight, and there was no more room, and nothing left to do but cry out in claustrophobic helplessness.

"I wonder . . ?" began Matheson, but then lapsed into frowning silence.

". . . Where this is going to lead?" Brit finished for him.

"May have to close up the shop here. I can't see getting much done with this going on. It comes right through the walls."

There was a group of nurses nearby. Matheson was watching one of them who stood gripping the railing, head thrown back. Her mouth came open and she dazedly began to echo the haunting sound welling up from the streets.

Matheson was there quickly, dragging her away from the railing and slapping her into silence.

"Everyone inside!" he said, "We can't let this infect us, too!"

Brit caught sight of Tink as the crowd thinned. She was still looking down at the madness below.

"Don't they know?" she said as Brit urged her toward an exit. "There's a starship coming back. It's a hope. Don't they realize there's still hope?"

"Honey, I think the news of the Alpha ship is what touched this off. Some idiot went too far and let the word out about the radio silence."

"The what?"

"We wanted to keep it quiet until she docks at Earth Station and we can find out more about it. But everyone seems to know already."

"Except me. Brit, know what?"

"The Alpha ship is coming in under computer flight control. All the telemetry data so far indicates that there's no one alive on board."

"Oh Lord, no!"

"The worst of it is that she's still so far out. It'll be days yet before she finishes her retro program, then longer still while she coasts in. Her autolog may tell us a lot, give us something we can use to stop that insanity out there. Maybe. But who knows how far this will have gone in a week or so. There may not be anything left to try to salvage by then."

Mother knew instinctively that she was in danger. Even her animal sensibilities were offended by

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the weird sound she could dimly hear when she pressed an ear to the wall. And now there was the smoke, just a hint, a subtle, acrid taint in the air.

She somehow sensed that this meant something was very wrong, for this place in which she was kept had always been so carefully cleaned, everything kept so fresh and pure, including the air.

She fretted and prowled about the ward, doubly worried, for instinct also demanded that she preserve at all cost the life she carried within her.

She began to search for some way out of the ward. She had been content with being confined before, since she had never known any other kind of existence, and had always been so perfectly cared for. But now she felt threatened by the sound and the smoke, and it seemed imperative that she escape.

She began to investigate every seam, every inch of wall, floor and ceiling surface. Eventually she discovered the access panel and vaguely remembered it as the means by which she was originally put into the room. But here, of course, she was stumped.

For she was a chimpanzee and, though a clever animal, she was far from having the intelligence to reason out some way to open the panel. And, of course, it was designed to be opened only from the outside.

She sat back on her haunches and glared at the panel, feeling her young stir in her belly.

And then she became a marionette. She moved, but not by her own volition. She was being moved, used by something, some other will, not her own. She was a tool being utilized for the purpose of this other will's escape.

She found herself in the ceiling grid, her hands busy manipulating, dismantling, prying loose the bars. Watching in dumb fascination, she saw her hands do impossible things, miraculous things she herself could never have thought of doing. She watched them fashion a mechanism, the purpose and working principle of which was utterly beyond her.

Then she was positioning it against the panel, then operating it, and the panel was open.

Smoke poured through the opening, but the power that had taken control of her refused to let her panic. Against all logic it urged her into the burning passageway, goaded her on through the flames, and guided her, squealing in fear, to one stairwell after another.

Finally she, they, found one that was not a roaring furnace. Even so, the heat from below was unbearable, and the only direction they could go was up.

There were humans there when they finally emerged, and thundering machines that gobbled up

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the humans and leaped into the sky.

That sky. It was pure horror, a writhing, dancing, endless vista of belching, flame-reddened blackness. All the world was burning it seemed.

Mother finally balked. The will beyond her own couldn't budge her. She cowered in a trembling heap, covering her eyes in rejection of the terrifying spectacle. For this was too much. This was hell itself, even to the limited mentality of a chimpanzee. It was all around her. There was no escape now. She slumped, paralyzed with animal dread of the towering flames on every side.

She dimly heard the familiar voice, but it was somehow far away and unreal. She had retreated too far into herself to care anymore. In any case, the words were meaningless to her, as the sounds humans made always had been.

"Why, it's Mother! How in the world . . ?" the voice said.

"Never mind!" shouted another, "C'mon!"

"We've got to take her. Help."

"But . . ! Oh, okay. Okay. But we've got to hurry!"

Hands lifted her and she felt herself being carried closer to one of the howling machines. Then she knew it had devoured her. But she was still cradled in the arms, and the voices were still there.

"Oh darling! Look. Look down there. It's unthinkable!"

"I'd rather not have to remember it."

"They did it on purpose. And the radio said it's happening everywhere."

"Yes."

"Is this it? Really it? The end of everything?"

"I don't know."

"Where are we going? Is there anywhere left to go?"

"Maybe. Just maybe one place."

"Where?"

"High Eden."

The great, shining sphere glided majestically down along the taut thread of coherent light that had guided it through the last phase of its long, long voyage home. Like a giant silver bead it slid down the beam toward the slowly revolving cylinder that was Earth Station.

The homecoming was a dismally mechanical affair, far from the spectacular, festive thing it should have been. There should have been thousands of spacecraft packed with cheering spectators, missile salutes blossoming in fiery splendor, martial music blaring on every radio frequency, and frantic revelry on the blue-green, cloud streaked planet below.

But this could not be, for another kind of madness reigned there, and the starship's return seemed empty of meaning, the culmination of a futile gesture, since its thousand man crew ap-

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parently had not survived the twenty-year voyage.

Still, there were many who hoped, and of course the ship had to be brought in, and so the fleet of tiny, one-man spacetugs was scrambled and came darting out from Earth Station to rendezvous and swarm about their charge like minnows escorting a whale.

With much more purposefulness than minnows, however, the tugs joined ranks against first one looming flank then another to fire precisely timed and co-ordinated spurts from their thrusters, and so nursed the big starbird to its berth on the inside wall of Earth Station.

"How about it, Doc?" said Spaceman Third Class Max Dunkleman, "What's the word from up there?"

"Max, please. How can I tell how your new plumbing is doing with you bouncing all over the bed. Here, dog the hatch down on this a minute, will you?" ordered Brit, inserting a thermometer into his mouth.

"I had a couple buddies aboard the Alpha C," Max said from the corner of his mouth. "Please, Doc . . ?"

"We just don't know yet, Max. They're just bringing her in now. I'll be going up with a bunch of our people as soon as we can locate a spacecraft that's still in commission. *If* we can locate one."

"Is it that bad out there? They're even tearing up the spaceports?"

"It's completely out of control. We're in contact with a few pockets of sanity, like we've set up here. In the mountains, a couple of islands, but that's about it. Scientists, a few government and military people, some of the tougher breed of civilians like Chauncey. We're it, Max. All that's left. A scattering of jury-rigged outposts around the world. The rest is . . . bedlam."

"Sheee!" breathed Dunkleman, "Who'd have thought it was going to go like this? Doc, what about me? Am I in any kind of shape to go up to Earth Station with you guys?"

Brit checked the thermometer. "Well, it's only been a week and a half since the operation. But everything looks good. How do you feel?"

"Great. Y'know, I ended up flying one of the copters up here the other night. No sweat."

"Yeah, well, we may need you at that. It may end up we'll find a vehicle but no crew to fly it."

Chauncey's wife leaned in the door.

"Dr. Keogh, can you come? Dr. Bell, the monkey, it's going to . . . she says hurry . . . out in the barn."

Mother was dead when Brit reached the neat little room Tink had set up for the chimp in the barn. But Tink was still working

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frantically over the animal on an improvised operating table.

"Brit! Brit, help me! Quickly."

"What? What in the world are you doing?"

"Caesarian. Please help me!"

"Honey, why bother now . . ?"

"I want a chance to study this alive. Look . . !"

She had already made the incision, and Mother's young was partially visible. Just enough of the head and face. Brit gasped.

It lived for a few hours, but a few hours was long enough. Long enough for it to demonstrate once more, though weakly, its startling capacity to project its will, its consciousness, into another mind, even a human mind.

They both felt it, briefly. A feeble, but real *presence,* an embryonic intelligence, searching within their minds, as if looking for some knowledge, some way of preserving itself. But then it faded, along with the heartbeat of the hairless, pink creature Mother had given birth to.

Tink wandered out into the sunlight. The wild, impossible theory she had had all along concerning Mother now was the only likely explanation.

"Honey?" called Brit, behind her.

She turned and was about to speak when the mountains in the background distracted her. They were suddenly tilting crazily, as if about to turn right upside down. She looked down and the ground where she stood was sloping, too, rushing up at her.

At the last instant an arm, sleeved in white, shot across her field of vision. Good old Brit, she thought, watching through a thickening haze as he somehow made the mountains right themselves again.

Then she closed her eyes and wondered if this was it. For now she knew. She had finally gotten around to taking a look at her own blood, and it had looked almost as bad as the later samples from Mother.

The gray fog in her head was turning to wool. In a moment she would be unconscious. But there was something left undone, something she had been about to tell Brit.

Her idea, her crazy theory. Mother, the Alpha mission, the way they had suddenly linked up in her mind, the weird parallel that made so much sense, and yet was so fantastic. She had to tell him, in case. In case the darkness closing in around her should be forever.

With a supreme effort she groped through the fog, fighting for enough awareness to sort out what was happening. Brit was lowering her onto a couch on the veranda.

She clutched at him, trying to form the words, make her voice work, but couldn't. Then he was

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gone, shouting for someone to bring his bag, but her hand had caught in his breast pocket, spilling out its contents. Notepad, pen . . .

Unable to raise her head she scrawled the message by feel alone, and prayed it was legible as the blackness came with a rush.

Dunkleman altered the space ferry's orbital attitude for docking, and Brit watched morosely as Earth Station swam into view through the port.

"There she is!" said Dunkleman, pointing out the Alpha C moored inside the station. "What a ship!"

Matheson smiled humorlessly at the spaceman's excitement. "Easy does it, Max. Get us down before you get too excited."

Brit stared at the Alpha C and tried to make himself care that at least he was seeing her again. But then, what did that matter, he thought, if the crew hadn't made it. He remembered a lot of them, nearly a third of them, the ones he had helped do the internal replacements on. And what good had it done? Matheson had remarked earlier that the mission could be termed a qualified success, since the ship at least was back. That was almost laughable, now.

"C'mon, Keogh. Clear the decks. We've got a lot of work to do."

"Ah, Mat!" Brit sighed, "What's the use?"

"Hey boy, you going to go off the deep end and join the other camp?"

"You know what we're going to find aboard that ship, Mat. And we'll be right back where we started from. Only this time we won't be able to take another shot at it. It's a dead end, so pardon me if I lack some of Max's enthusiasm."

"And you know there's another reason for your lack of enthusiasm. Brit, there's still a lot we can do. She might make it if we can replace her blood producing system, a lot of things."

"Too far. The little fool let it go too far for that!" grated Brit. "I thought something was wrong two weeks ago. Why in the world didn't I insist she get a check up?"

"Well, look, stop kicking yourself. She's in pretty fair shape now. The blood replacement will help."

"For a while. But what happens when we can't round up any more of her type? No, then she'll have had it, and me, too."

"Hang on," said Dunkleman, easing the ferry's docking bar home. There was a lurch as the mooring crew inside Earth Station locked the vehicle into the hatch and the station's rotational motion supplied a partial sense of gravity.

The starship's autolog tapes recounted the long, tedious, eight-

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year journey out to Earth's nearest stellar neighbor. It had been a relatively uneventful crossing with only minor mechanical problems.

There was no hint of anything to account for the absence of every single member of the crew. There wasn't even one body in the cold room, a quick-freeze morgue included in the ship for the purpose of allowing post mission investigation of causes of death.

Brit was pouring over the medical officer's personal log even as he listened to the ship's tapes. But even here there was no indication of trouble. No suggestion at all of cancer symptoms appearing among the crew, leukemia or otherwise. At least not yet.

They had reached Alpha Centauri. They had even found seven planets out of thirty-one in the complex binary system that were potential New Earths.

But, again, what good was that, mused Brit ruefully, with everything gone to hell and no way to get a human being out there alive anyway.

Then he realized his stupidity. They *had* gotten there alive! The autolog, the medical records had just said so.

Just before they both abruptly ended.

The last entry in the ship doctor's journal said, "Sudden, widespread complaints of headaches, dizziness, myself included. Tests indicate impossibly rapid development of blood cancer. Plasma refusion no help. Odd, though, that no one dead yet. Prosthetic systems seem to be only thing sustaining us. Getting difficult to think, continue this . . ."

The master log echoed the doctor's account, with one addition. That the mission commander had set up for a computer directed return flight, just in case.

Then nothing. There were thousands of other tapes recording mechanical functions of the ship, and these catalogued its automated return flight, but that was all.

"Well, looks like you were right, Brit."

"Huh?"

"Dead end all the way," Matheson sighed.

"I don't suppose it would do any good to go through her again," said the Earth Station commander. "I could put more of my people at your disposal."

"We've already done a pretty microscopic job. About all the further we could go in that direction would be to start taking her apart piece by piece."

Brit doodled abstractly on his notepad, only half listening. Matheson's last words started him thinking about what he and Tink had found when they had taken Mother apart. He wondered if they would end up with something equally mysterious if they went to

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the trouble of dismantling the ship.

Matheson, prowling thoughtfully about the room, stopped behind Brit's chair.

"What's that?" he asked.

Brit glanced down at the words he was embellishing on his notepad. He couldn't remember having taken any notes during the log playback session. And the hardly readable words were certainly not in his handwriting.

"Beats me," he said, trying to decipher the scrawled, apparently meaningless message. " 'Prosthesis . . . radiation . . . leuk/cancer . . . shortcut. . . ' "

Matheson added the last words haltingly. " 'Cancer is evil.' Well, I'll go along with that."

"Wait a minute, Mat. That looks like an 'o'. That'd make it 'evol . . .' " Brit scowled.

Then he remembered. The pad on the floor, the pen in Tink's hand. He had automatically returned them to his pocket without looking at the notepad in his frantic rush to attend to her.

"Tink must have written this, just before she passed out!"

"No wonder it makes no sense," Matheson said. "She was delirious."

"I don't know. 'Shortcut' and 'evol'. That rings a bell somehow."

And he had it. He had said it himself.

"Good Lord! Of course. Evolutionary shortcut! This is an abbreviation, Mat. For 'evolution'. She's saying . . ."

"Cancer is evolution?" Matheson finished for him. "Well, as I said, she was delirious."

"No, Mat. Don't you see? It makes sense. Think, Mat. Add it up, just as she has here. You saw the thing Mother produced. Prosthesis plus radiation plus leukemia, a form of cancer, equals shortcut; an evolutionary leap."

Matheson turned away to prowl again, lost in thought.

"It's preposterous, but maybe . . . cancer . . . evolution, maybe it is the only explanation," he mused.

"That amazing thing Mother's offspring could do with its mind. See the parallel? It equates to the development of human reasoning power way back when. It probably took millions of years then, with only random, secondary radiation producing an occasional brain tumor, but eventually mankind came down the pike. But with Mother, we unknowingly set up conditions that eliminated the trial and error element of natural selection. Our artificial gadgetry kept her alive, the radiation-produced form of cancer ran its full course, and that thing, that hairless, almost human thing we found in Mother's womb was the result."

"Cancer . . . evolution . . ." repeated Matheson. "If it's true it would explain a lot more than the business with your chimp. Like

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why we could never even get close to finding a cure for cancer. How can you 'cure' an organism's natural tendency to evolve?"

"It would be like trying to cure a caterpillar of the 'disease' of metamorphosis into a butterfly," Brit said.

There was a long silence in the room, then Matheson cleared his throat.

"Uh, well, Brit, it's an interesting theory. But I think we've gotten off the track. We still have this little problem here of the missing crew and . . ."

Brit looked up and caught the sudden look of excitement in Matheson's eyes. He knew his own expression must have matched the director's.

"Are you thinking what I am?" Brit whispered.

"Maybe," Matheson said, looking around almost furtively at the vast instrumentation packed into the starship's control room.

They had both suddenly seen the much more dramatic parallel between the experiment with Mother and the voyage of the Alpha C.

"I wonder . . ." Brit began.

Max Dunkleman stumbled into the room.

"Doc . . !" he gasped, clutching his head and contorting his face in a grimace of amazement. "They . . . I . . . ohmiGod!"

Brit dashed to him in alarm, but the spaceman fended him off, then burst out laughing in joyful relief.

"You dirty so and so! Where the Hell are you, you goldbricking son of a . . ."

"All right, Mister!" snapped the Station Commander.

"Ooops!" yelped Max, snapping to attention.

"Wait a minute," Brit insisted. "Max, what is it?"

"It's him, Doc. One of my buddies on this ship. He's talking to me. In here, in my head!"

"What?" snorted the Station Commander.

"Yes sir. He says no sweat. They're okay. All of them. They don't know for sure what happened, except that, somehow, they just didn't die from the cancer."

"The next step," Brit said, smiling, and suddenly realizing how he could save Tink.

"What's that, Brit?" Matheson asked.

"They've taken the next step Adaptation. Life had to adapt itself to dry land when it crawled out of the sea. Now we're making a similar move, and adapting. From water to air; from air to the vacuum of space. It's the next logical step."

Matheson frowned but nodded his head slowly.

"I suppose that's why only Dunkleman can communicate with them. He's a spaceman, physically and mentally trained to live in space, so I guess he's sort of tuned

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to their frequency. But Max, what's it like for them? Ask your friend where they are; what they are."

Dunkleman concentrated for a moment, then shrugged.

"He can't really say. They're everywhere, all at once, he says. Here, and clear out at Alpha Centauri, and everywhere in between, and everywhere else in the galaxy, and even beyond. Like they *are* anywhere they can *think* of being. As for *what* they are, he says he could never explain. They're just free, roaming everywhere, anywhere in the universe . . . like soaring free as . . . free as . . ."

"Butterflies," said the male larva.

Through the ship's huge observation port, the few thousand passengers looked back at Earth as the planet dwindled in size with increasing distance.

They looked back probably much as earlier forms of life may have looked back upon the sea.

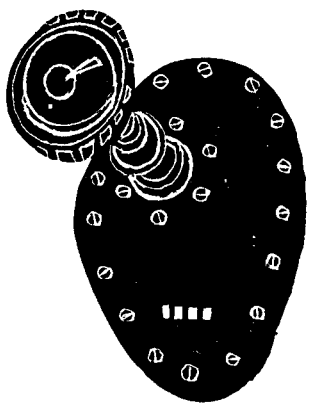
The female larva in the wheelchair looked up at the male beside her.

"What did you say, darling?"

"You asked what we'll be like . . . afterwards. Max's friend couldn't say, couldn't find the words to describe it, but I'll bet that's close."

"Butterflies," repeated the female larva. "Oh, Brit . . !"

She took his hand and smiled weakly, but happily, and the great silver sphere hurtled on into the deep black.



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Here is a second (SOMETHING IN IT, Oct. 1966) short and strange fable by R. L. Stevenson, Still a third has been brought to our attention by Lawrence A. Perkins. Here it is:

"Be ashamed of yourself!" said the frog. "When I was a tadpole, I had no tail."

"Just what I thought!" said the tadpole. "You were never a tadpole."

The Song of the Morrow

by Robert Louis Stevenson

THE KING OF DUNTRINE HAD A daughter when he was old, and she was the fairest king's daughter between two seas. Her hair was like spun gold, and her eyes like pools in a river. The King gave her a castle upon the sea beach, with a terrace and a court of hewn stone and four towers at the four corners. Here she dwelt and grew up, and had no care for the morrow, and no power upon the hour, after the manner of simple men.

It befell that she walked one day by the beach of the sea when it was autumn, and the wind blew from the place of rains. Upon the one hand of her the sea beat, and upon the other the dead leaves ran. This was the loneliest beach between two seas, and strange things had been done there in ancient ages.

Now the King's daughter was aware of a crone that sat upon the beach. The sea foam ran to her feet, and the dead leaves swarmed about her back, and the rags blew about her face in the blowing of the wind.

"Now," said the King's daughter as she named a holy name, "this is the most unhappy old crone between two seas."

"Daughter of a King," said the crone, "you dwell in a stone house, and your hair is like spun gold, but what is your profit? Life is not long, nor lives strong. You live after the way of simple men and have no thought for the morrow, and no power upon the hour."

"Thought for the morrow, that I have," said the King's daughter. "But power upon the hour, that I have not." And she mused within herself.

Then the crone smote her lean hands one within the other and laughed like a seagull. "Home!"

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cried she, "O daughter of a King, home to your stone house! Now the longing is come upon you, nor can you live any more after the manner of simple men. Home, and toil and suffer till the gift come that will make you bare, and till the man come that will bring you care."

The King's daughter made no more ado, but turned about and went home to her house in silence. And when she was come into her chamber, she called for her nurse.

"Nurse," said the King's daughter, "thought is come upon me for the morrow, so that I can live no more after the manner of simple men. Tell me what I must do that I may have power upon the hour."

Then the nurse moaned like a snow wind. "Alas," said she, "that this thing should be! The thought is gone into your marrow, nor is there any cure against the thought. Be it so, then, even as you will. Though power is less than weakness, power shall you have; and though the thought is colder than winter, yet shall you think it to an end."

So the King's daughter sat in her vaulted chamber in the masoned house, and she thought upon her thought. Nine years she sat as the sea beat upon the terrace and the gulls cried about the turrets and the wind crooned in the chimneys of the house. Nine years she came not abroad, nor tasted the clean air, nor saw God's sky. Nine years she sat and looked neither to the right nor to the left, nor heard speech of any one, but thought upon the thought of the morrow. And her nurse fed her in silence. The King's daughter took of the food with her left hand, and ate it without grace.

Now when the nine years were out, it fell dusk in the autumn; and there came a sound in the wind like a sound of piping. At that, the nurse lifted up her finger in the vaulted house.

"I hear a sound in the wind," said she, "that is like the sound of piping."

"It is but a little sound," said the King's daughter, "but yet it is sound enough for me."

So they went down in the dusk to the doors of the house, and along the beach of the sea. Upon the one hand of them the sea beat, and upon the other the dead leaves ran. Above them the clouds raced in the sky, and the gulls flew widdershins. And when they came to that part of the beach where strange things had been done in ancient ages, lo! there was the crone, and she was dancing widdershins.

"Old crone," said the King's daughter, "what makes you dance widdershins here upon the bleak beach, between the waves and the dead leaves?"

"I hear a sound in the wind that is like a sound of piping," quoth she, "and it is for that that I dance

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widdershins. For the gift comes that will make you bare, and the man comes that must bring you care. But for me, the morrow is come that I have thought upon, and the hour of my power."

"How comes it, old crone," marveled the King's daughter, "that you waver like a rag, and pale like a dead leaf, before my eyes?"

"Because the morrow has come that I have thought upon, and the hour of my power," said the crone. With that she fell on the beach, and lo! she was but stalks of the sea tangle and the dust of the sea sand, and the sand lice hopped upon the place of her.

"This is the strangest thing that ever befell between two seas," said the King's daughter of Duntrine. But the nurse broke out and moaned like an autumn gale. "I am weary of the wind," quoth she, and bewailed her day.

Then the King's daughter was aware of a man upon the beach who went hooded that none might perceive his face, and a bagpipe was underneath his arm. The sound of his pipe was like singing wasps, and like the wind that sings in windelstraw. It took hold upon men's ears like the crying of gulls.

"Are you the comer?" quoth the King's daughter of Duntrine.

"I am the comer," said he, "and these are the pipes that a man may hear; for I have power upon the hour, and this is the song of the morrow." Then he piped the song of the morrow. It was as long as years, and nurse wept out aloud at the hearing of it.

"It is true," said the King's daughter, "that you pipe the song of the morrow; but that ye have power upon the hour—how may I know that? Show me a marvel here upon the beach, between the waves and the dead leaves."

And the man said, "Upon whom?"

"Here is my nurse," quoth the King's daughter. "She is weary of the wind. Show me a good marvel upon her."

And lo! the nurse fell upon the beach as it were two handfuls of dead leaves, and the wind whirled them widdershins, and the sand

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lice hopped upon the place of her.

"It is true," said the King's daughter of Duntrine. "You are the comer, and you have power upon the hour. Come with me to my stone house."

So they went by the sea margin as the man piped the song of the morrow, and the leaves followed behind them as they went. Then they sat down together as the sea beat upon the terrace and the gulls cried about the turrets and the wind crooned in the chimneys of the house. Nine years they sat; and every year when it fell autumn, the man said, "This is the hour, and I have power in it." But the daughter of the King said, "Nay, but pipe me the song of the morrow. And he piped it, and it was as long as years.

Now when the nine years were gone, the King's daughter of Duntrine got to her feet like one that remembers, and she looked about her in the masoned house. All her servants were gone; only the man that piped sat upon the terrace with the hood upon his face, and as he piped, the leaves ran about the terrace and the sea beat along the wall.

Then she cried to him with a great voice, "This is the hour; let me see the power in it." And with that, the wind blew off the hood from the man's face, and lo! there was no man there—only the clothes and the hood. The pipes tumbled one upon another in a corner of the terrace, and the dead leaves ran over them.

Then the King's daughter of Duntrine got her to that part of the beach where strange things had been done in ancient ages, and there she sat her down. The sea foam ran to her feet, and the dead leaves swarmed about her back, and the veil blew about her face in the blowing of the wind. And when she lifted up her eyes, there was the daughter of a king come walking on the beach. Her hair was like spun gold, and her eyes like pools in a river. She had no thought for the morrow and no power upon the hour, after the manner of simple men.

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THE INTELLIGENT COMPUTER

by Ted Thomas

SERIOUS DISCUSSION OF THE POSsibility of building an intelligent computer started in 1956 at a meeting held at Dartmouth College. By that time computer programs had been devised that held promise of stimulating intelligence in a computer. This means that there was the possibility of building a computer that could set up its own goals, consider theories of its own devising, and make its own plans for solving a problem. These are some of the attributes of intelligence.

It is not true that a computer can solve a problem only when the programmer has supplied a step-by-step outline of the solution. Problems of geometrical analogy have already been solved by computers. They were solved after the programmer set them up to see if some of the elements of human reasoning appeared in the solution supplied by the computer. They did.

It is impossible for computers to solve many problems by a simple trial-and-error approach. The possibilities are too enormous even in such a problem as playing a game of checkers. Instead, the computer must be programmed to select a few of the most important features of the problem, make some trials based on them, and then use some rules to decide when to stop testing and move. And computers have now reached the point where in a limited manner they use procedures that may properly be called intuition and insight. So the day of the intelligent computer, while not here, is imminent.

Now, all sorts of good things will flow from the use of such computers. But there are going to have to be some changes in the laws of the land to cope with them. For example, the patent statutes require that the inventor be the one who applies for a patent even if a corporation is the owner of the invention. When a computer makes an invention—as it will—how can it

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be considered to be the applicant under our present laws? For one thing, it could not assign its invention to its corporation. Contests between computers will take place to see which computer made a given invention first.

By that time the patent application will probably be examined by a computer too, and the whole affair will grow very complicated. And our Commissioner of Patents will be a little man in overalls running around with an oil can.

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Here is the second part of John Christopher's new novel about a strange discovery in an Irish vacation retreat and its gradual but electrifying effect upon eight guests. If you missed part one, the author's synopsis will bring you quickly and efficiently up to date.

THE LITTLE PEOPLE

by John Christopher

(Second of three parts)

SYNOPSIS: For a holiday away from it all, you could scarcely do better than Killabeg Castle, lying in the middle of Killabeg Bog, not far from the west coast of Ireland. Stefan Morwitz, a successful German businessman, son of an executed Nazi war criminal, brings his half-Jewish wife there. Waring and Helen Selkirk, threshing in a marriage of mutual hatred, arrive with their teen-age daughter, Cherry. The proprietress is Bridget Chauncey, brought up in England, who unexpectedly inherited the place, the previous winter, from an unknown Irish cousin. Also staying at the Castle are Bridget's fiance, Daniel Gillow, a London solicitor, and Mat O'Hanlon, a Dubliner in the same profession. He, too, has fancied himself in love with Bridget, but is having to make do with the bottle and, to his surprise, with the open and trusting affection of young Cherry.

When Bridget first came to the Castle, she found a strange thing: a locked room in the old tower fitted up as a kind of laboratory-workshop but fantastically containing a set of dolls' houses. And the first night of his stay, Waring Selkirk, looking out from his window, thinks he sees in the moonlight a miniature human being. This is the land of the Little People of legend and though no one —not even Waring himself—believes that this is what he has seen—they begin to wonder.

Then Daniel, the stolid unimaginative Englishman, finds a footprint outside by the base of the tower: the impression of a sandal two inches long. Things have been missing from

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the house, from the kitchen, chiefly. Food, string, candles, a knife—apparatus for survival in a giant's world. Near the footprint there is a hole, leading down into the tower, with a length of green thread snagged on a sharp corner of stone. They search the cellars, part of which are flooded from the nearby lake. Among a mass of papers, Stefan finds a journal, written in German. Together, they discover a stub of candle. A street lamp for Lilliputians.

Something is going on, but what? A hoax, perhaps? A publicity stunt to bring the tourists flocking? They lay on a night watch, more for something to do than from a belief that there is anything to see. In the dark they hear sounds from a pile of junk against the wall dividing house and tower. Daniel flashes a torch on, and two tiny men dart back into the hole from which they have emerged. They have found the Little People, only to lose them again. But not all of them . . .

She stood in the far corner, pressed hard against the angle of the walls. As they advanced on her, Waring was expecting her to cry out or try to dart away. But she stayed there, silent, motionless, her little eyes staring up into their giant's faces.

IX

SHE WAS SO DEEPLY ASLEEP that the light did not wake her; she was only roused by the hand on her shoulder, shaking her, gently but with the clear intention of bringing her back to consciousness. She opened an eye, which ached in protest, and saw Daniel standing over her. At that moment, she loathed him. She rolled over, away from him, burrowing down.

"Go away. Please go away."

"No," he said. "Wake up, darling. It's important."

"Not to me."

"But I tell you it is."

She realized, furiously, that she was awake. She sat up abruptly and stared at him, blinking her eyes. The light still hurt, but he swam into focus. She said:

"Now listen to me. I *told* you I had to have a night's rest. I meant it, too. You are not getting in this bed under any circumstances, and if you carry on with these ape-like pranks, that's going to become permanent. Now you can run along back to your own room . . ."

Daniel said: "You look delicious."

Belatedly she scooped the edge of the sheet up to her neck.

"I don't feel delicious. I feel absolutely bloody livid. If you had any consideration for me at all, you would realize . . ."

"I'm not trying to make you. That's important, too, but it can wait. We've caught one of them."

"One of what?"

"The little people."

Bridget drew a deep breath. "My God! There's some excuse for

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honest lust, but to wake me up in the middle of the night for a practical joke beats everything." She stared at him. "You must be mad. Or drunk?"

"There were three of them," he said. "They came through the heap of rubbish down in the cellar. There's a hole in the wall that leads into the tower. They must have been using this tunnel for some time, keeping stuff in front of the opening so that it wasn't spotted. Two of them got back before we could get hold of them, but the third was either too far out, or ran the wrong way when the alarm was raised. We captured her. She's quite docile."

"She?" He had the look on his face she associated with important and difficult cases in law, a brooding absorption. It had been one of the things that had first attracted her. With alarm she understood that he was being quite serious, that he was talking about something that had actually happened, here in the house.

She said quietly: "How big is she?"

"A foot high, or a little under."

"And what . . .? I mean, what does she look like?"

"Come and see." He went to the door and brought her housecoat. "You'd better put this on."

She heard Helen's laugh as they went into the library, and wondered suspiciously if her first guess could have been right and this be part of some lunatic and unpardonable joke. They were standing by the billiard table with their backs to her, and she could not see what they were looking at until Mat glanced round and moved silently to one side. Then she saw. The doll-like figure was standing almost in the centre of the expanse of green baize, head bowed, minuscule hands limp by her sides. Ludicrously, she was dressed in green, too, in the old country dress of Irish girls. She wore nothing over her glossy jet black hair, and no stockings. On her feet she had sandals, a green cloth band across the instep and what looked like miniaturized rope soles. Not rope, but string. Of course.

"Have you got anything out of her yet?" Daniel asked.

Stefan said: "Nothing. She will not speak."

"Maybe she can't," Helen said. "She may be dumb."

"They were whispering in the tunnel," Daniel said. "But I couldn't make out whether it was in English or not."

Cherry said quietly: "She's probably dumb with fright, poor thing. She's trembling."

Bridget saw there was indeed a slight tremor from time to time in the hunched shoulders. Her hair was done in two braids, one lying behind and the other twisted and falling over her breast. She wondered how old she was, or if that

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word had any meaning. The face did not have the roundness of a child's but the lines rather of a young and almost beautiful woman. Not quite beautiful: the nose was not perfectly straight, and something else was wrong. After a moment, she got it. The head was tiny, but not quite proportionately so with the body—it should have been smaller. A young woman, just past girlhood? But her breasts were scarcely in evidence. Her figure at least had a child's purity of line.

Helen said: "Why should she speak English, anyway? She probably talks Gaelic. Mat, you try saying something to her. Ask her something."

He looked as though he would refuse, until Cherry reinforced the request. Then he spoke a few words rapidly in Erse. The little figure gave no sign of having understood, or even heard him. Helen asked:

"What was all that?"

He said awkwardly: "Nothing, really. Asking her did she know what I was saying."

Daniel leaned forward and rapped the table hard with his knuckles. She started, and her head jerked up to look in that direction, but then dropped again. He said:

"Not deaf, at any rate."

Bridget asked: "The others—were they the same?"

"No. Little men. But wearing green." There was a baffled note in his voice. "That's why one has the feeling it's all been put on for our benefit. But that's nonsense, of course. Freaks from a circus? But she's a miniature, rather than a dwarf."

Waring said: "Not a dwarf. She's too well proportioned. You get pygmies from time to time, but nothing so small as that, I would say. Who was that at the court of Charles the Second? They called him Tom Thumb, something like that, and he fought duels. But he was two or three feet high, as I remember."

Daniel said: "And three of them."

With a touch of irascibility, Helen said: "Isn't it obvious? You have all the legends of the little people. Not just here, but all over—all over Europe, certainly. So the legends were true, and here's the living proof of it. My God, you want to disbelieve what your own eyes show you!"

Waring said: "Not disbelieve, evaluate. O.K., so she's here and she's real. I accept that. But why, and how? Little people? It's like having a banshee stretched out on the dissecting table.'

Her voice had been loud, and his had risen in replying. It would be like the rumbling thunder of the gods, Bridget thought, tossing their insults at each other like thunderbolts across the vastness of heaven. She was wondering how to say this

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tactfully, when Cherry reached forward. She stretched her arms across the green baize and took the small figure gently between her hands. There was a tensing, but Cherry ignored that and lifted the little one and brought her to her. She made a crook of her arm, and settled her in it as best she could. The eyes had closed, Bridget saw, the trembling was more violent.

Waring said, quietly now: "I should watch her."

"Why?"

"She might bite, or scratch."

"I don't think so."

"Watch it, all the same."

With a finger of her free hand, Cherry touched her, making small stroking movements. The figure did not resist, but did not relax either. She was trembling still. Cherry said:

"Isn't she lovely?" Her voice was soft. "Don't be frightened, lovely. No one's going to hurt you. You're going to be O.K."

The others watched for a moment or two in silence. Stefan broke it. As though talking to himself, his voice not much above a whisper, he said:

"Sie ist so schon. Wie eine Puppe."

Bridget saw the small eyes open, staring. They were brown, with long black lashes. Then the little one spoke. Her voice was shrill and tiny. Bridget could not catch a single word, but with a shock of surprise she realized she knew what language it was. She turned to Stefan.

"That's . . ."

His astonishment mirrored and magnified her own. He said slowly: "I know. She is speaking German."

Daniel asked impatiently: "What did she say?"

"I could not tell. It is so fast and high-pitched, and also garbled." She was watching him from Cherry's arms, the alertness fading back to dull resignation. Stefan bent towards her, and spoke again, in German. Bridget gathered he was asking her to speak slowly. The brightness flowed back again.

A conversation developed. Helen started to ask something, but Stefan hushed her with a wave of his hand. Communication was uncertain—each had to repeat things, some times more than once—but it was communication. All the time, Cherry cradled her in her arms. When, after some minutes, there was a break, Daniel said:

"Can you tell us anything now?"

Stefan shook his head. "Not much. They live in the tower. They have always lived in the tower, she says. There are seven of them, five boys and two girls."

"Seven!" Waring said. "But where do they come from? Their ancestors, I mean?"

Cherry said: "What's her name?"

Stefan said slowly: *"Wie heissensie, kleines Fraulein?"*

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They could all hear the silvery disyllable:

"Greta."

"That's cute," Cherry said.

"Also German," Waring said. "It makes no kind of sense does it? Ask her, Stefan. Ask her about her folks—how they got here. You know."

He put a question, and was answered. He said to Waring:

"She only knows they have always been in the tower. There are no parents. Only what she calls the Big One—*der Grosse.*"

"In the tower," Daniel said. "But perhaps not down in the cellars all the time. In the upper room? Did they live in the little houses?"

Stefan spoke to her, and said:

"Yes. They lived higher up, in the houses."

"And *der Grosse . . .*" Daniel said.

Bridget said: "Cousin Seamus! He wasn't just playing with dolls' houses. There were live dolls, too."

Waring said: "So why did they leave the houses?"

"It's understandable," Daniel said. "I suppose he was a kind of combination of father and god, as far as they were concerned. He had that heart attack up there. They saw him crawl away and down the stairs. It must have been a pretty severe shock. They might not want to stay in the place where the god had been stricken. So they went down to hide in the darkness."

Helen said: "Or went back to the place they'd come from in the first place. There must have been a race of them living down there. Ask her again about parents. Maybe she didn't understand you."

Stefan spoke to her, and listened carefully to the answer. He said:

"No, no parents. And they have always been there, in the room with the houses. None of them can remember a time before that."

"So he captured them as babies," Helen said. "And maybe not here. Some other part of Ireland."

Mat said: "And taught them to speak German?"

"In Germany, then. He found them on a trip sometime. In the Schwarzwald, maybe. They have some pretty wild parts in Germany, too."

"He was Irish," Mat said. "He never said anything about Germany to my father, and he had a Cork accent a yard thick. Why should he teach them German and not English?"

"Just a minute," Daniel said. "As her about that. Ask her if *der Grosse* spoke to them in their own tongue."

They saw her shake her small head, the braid of black hair moving on the immature breast. She answered, and Stefan said:

"No. He spoke to them in a strange language. He did not say much—only gave commands. In English, I think. One thing she re-

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members he said sounds like 'Do this'."

"Which leaves us," Waring said, "exactly where we started. They've always lived in the room with the houses, they had no mothers or fathers, and they speak German."

Helen said: "She may be lying."

"Why should she?" Cherry asked.

"To put us off the scent. If there's a tribe of them down there, or out in the bog or somewhere."

"The houses are there," Daniel said. "The room had a lock on the door, and barred windows. We know who *der Grosse* was. And she speaks German. The only thing she could be lying about is this business of parents. I don't see why she should."

There was a silence while they thought about this. Helen broke it.

"Anyway, what are we going to do about her?"

It was a fairly obvious question. Bridget realized she did not have a clue about answering it. The event was staggering enough in itself, without speculating on possible results.

Waring said: "Your fortune's made, Bridget."

"My fortune?"

"Headlines in the newspapers. TV news cameras blocking up your driveway. The Little People of Killabeg."

She said sharply: "Oh, no!"

Waring gave her a lopsided smile. "Before we caught Greta here, I thought that was the setup you and Daniel were working. My apologies."

Daniel said: "One will have to be realistic about it." She glanced up at him, and he went on quickly: "I'm not talking about making fortunes out of the newspapers. But the news is going to get out, isn't it?"

"Need it?"

"Seamus kept the secret for years, and so well that it died with him. But that was one man, with a locked room to which he had the key. Are you going to put them back in the tower room, and keep them locked up?"

"Well, of course not."

"Then there's Mrs. Malone and Mary. And tradesmen. Not to mention your guests. Even if everyone here keeps quiet about it, what about the next batch? And will everyone keep quiet? It's a great deal to ask."

Waring said: "Surely, the point is to get them into the right hands."

"What hands would those be?"

"Scientists. People who would know how to look after them and treat them properly."

Helen said: "People like you, you mean." The hostility was back in her voice, edged with naked contempt. "So they can be put in cages, or little study rooms with one-way mirrors. Weigh their food, weigh their excrement and urine. See how they copulate—how many times and with whom. X-rays and blood tests and urine tests and

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lumbar punctures. And then their minds have to be tested. Stanford-Binet and Rorschach and look at the pretty EEG lines. And good old Waring Selkirk pulling the strings and collecting material for that really big thesis, the one that's going to get his name in coloured lights on the wall of the Smithsonian."

He looked at her with dislike, but said mildly:

"Not quite as bad as that. And do you think the alternative's any better? What else are they likely to be but freaks in a circus?"

Mat said: "I don't think you've either of you got it right."

He was staring at the little one, and at Cherry who still held her in her arms. He had been drinking again. His face was flushed and set in hard angry lines. He spoke with a bitter emphasis that secured their attention. Even Greta was looking at him. Bridget wondered what thoughts could be passing behind those small delicate features. The realization of her humanity was fading; she was so tiny and puppet-like.

Mat went on: "They're not animals. They've got immortal souls the same as we have. And that means they've got rights and privileges. They can vote, once they've registered, for Fine Gael or Fianna Fail. Or they can go to England, and vote Labour or Tory. Or to Germany, and have a wider choice. But they won't need the vote, because they've got something to sell."

Bridget said: "To sell?"

He gave her a quick look. "Ah, not the pot of gold that turns to dead leaves the moment you've let go of it. They have themselves to sell. And all they need is a good lawyer, and a business manager, and a press agent, and they're in business with a million the first year and a steady income after. The money will pour in. From the television, the magazine articles, the advertising . . . A hundred guineas for opening a bazaar, a thousand for their names and pictures on a breakfast cereal packet. And after that they can teach themselves to play the guitar and form a pop group. The Stunted Seven. They would only be small guitars, you understand, but they have the wonderful amplifiers to make up the noise. And if that's too difficult, they can hire someone else to play the music, and just open and close their mouths at the right time. Did I say a million? I meant a million each." He said to Bridget, in contemptuous appeal: "You wouldn't stand between them and a future like that, would you now?"

Cherry said: "What would they want with a million dollars?"

"Pounds, not dollars." But his voice softened, Bridget noted. He went on more quietly: "They're human," he said. "With souls. And so to be tempted. What would she like, do you think? Diamond rings

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on her fingers, and platinum bells on her toes? Or the biggest doll's house in the world, with three hundred rooms and wall to wall carpeting—priceless Persian rugs cut up small—in each, and little golden baths and golden lavatories, and golden television sets, built to order with a five inch screen? And perhaps a miniature Rolls to drive around the two feet wide roadways she has laid on her estate? Or maybe she would like to collect paintings? You can spend a lot of money on a Nicholas Hilliard. Or she could buy a Rubens, and cover the ballroom ceiling with it."

Daniel said: "Point taken. We're going to have to give this some thought, aren't we? But I suggest not now." He looked at his watch, yawning. "One o'clock. We'll think more clearly after a few hours' rest."

Waring said: "And Greta? What do we do with her?"

Cherry said warmly: "She can come to bed with me. I'll look after her."

"And the moment you're asleep," Daniel said, "she slips out from the sheets, slides down the leg of the bed, and is off back to her brothers and sisters. We wouldn't catch her so easily a second time."

"Lock her up somewhere," Helen said.

Bridget said: "Do we have any right to do that?"

"That's something else that needs talking about," Daniel said, "and the same considerations apply." He was talking in his firm Gray's Inn voice. "Meanwhile, on the assumption that we had any right to catch her in the first place, I propose we also assume that we can keep her in comfortable duress until the morning." He looked at Bridget. "Any ideas about that?"

She said unwillingly: "There's the big clothes hamper; it has a strap that can be fastened."

"That will do. We can put something soft in for a bed, and to be doubly sure I would suggest locking it up somewhere. The downstairs cloakroom, for instance. That should be enough to frustrate any rescue operation her friends decide to go in for."

Daniel looked around the group, receiving some signs of assent, none of objection. He said to Stefan:

"The important thing is: can you explain to her what we're doing? That she's not going to be hurt, now or ever, and this is only a short-term measure. Can you get that over?"

Stefan nodded. "I think so."

Cherry said quickly: "And ask her if she wants anything to eat and drink. She may be thirsty."

Stefan spoke to her, slowly, repeating phrases and sentences where she showed signs of not understanding. At the end she stared at him blankly, but the small head nodded. She spoke a few words.

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"Not hungry, she says, but she would like some water."

Bridget said: "I'll get that."

Bridget slept through her alarm, and was only wakened by Mrs. Malone bearing a cup of tea.

She was down in ten minutes, dressed but, she was sure, dishevelled—*there had only been time to* run a comb quickly through her hair. At a time like this, she thought, it only needed Daniel to wave a special license under her nose and she would drop the whole thing and run. But it was not as bad as she had feared. Mary was attending to the cooking, dreamily but quite effectively, the only casualty a pound of cindered sausages. The coffee had not been made, but the water was boiling. Bridget slapped grains into the Cona, and started it off. Within a quarter of an hour it was a normal morning, things were running on schedule, and she was able to think more than a few seconds ahead. At that point she remembered the prisoner, with a pang of guilt. She should have been all right in the basket, but still . . . She looked for the cloakroom key, which she had left the night before on a high shelf by the door. It was not there.

Mary, when asked, denied all knowledge of it. Bridget thought of calling Mrs. Malone from the dining room, but decided it was quicker to go along to the cloakroom and see. Was it possible that the others had come back, found the key, rescued her? It seemed downright improbable, but that was a poor argument in the circumstances.

The cloakroom door was partly open, and as she approached it she saw that the hamper was open, too, its lid thrown back. She rushed in and saw that there had been no *rescue or escape. Greta sat in the* hamper on the cushion she had put for her. Bridget realized at the same moment that someone else was in the cloakroom. She looked and saw Stefan.

She said in relief: "So you took the key?"

He nodded, and she saw his face. The expression was one of tormented wretchedness. She said:

"What is it? What's wrong?"

He tried to say something, but the words did not come. She thought there were tears standing in his eyes. He was staring at Greta, who stared solemnly back.

"To do with her?" Bridget asked. He nodded again. "Then what?"

She waited for him to answer, beginning to be afraid, hearing the water in the pipes, the distant rumble of the generator. He did, at last, in a flat strained voice.

"It is that I know."

"Know what?"

"I know who the parents were."

X

Even before Mat saw the footprint, he believed. He trailed along

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with the others to the tower in a daze, almost reluctant to see what was there and yet longing for the visual proof. What outraged him most was Daniel's casualness, the detached way he pointed it out, and the clipped English voice: "The only thing that makes any sense is that some one of us came out early and made it." It was this which made him, a little later, turn the accusation against Daniel himself. Then Stefan found the hole, and he forced himself to repeat the gibe. But he knew this was real and true, and the most important thing that had ever happened in his life.

Every year, as a boy, he had gone to his grandfather and grandmother in the summer. There had been the long, slow train journey, stopping at stations that were no more than two platforms, with a few houses huddled together beyond, cows tossing their heads against the flies, the green of pasture and the long purple potato fields under a sky that was grey or blue but either way hot and still. And being met by the pony and trap and his grandfather giving the whip a flourish, and letting him give Betsy the lumps of sugar he had hoarded, and laughing and telling him not too much, or her teeth would be falling out. And the leisurely clopping ride up to the farmhouse, and his grandmother coming out in her blue flowered apron with the cats after her.

He had loved them both consciously, aware even then of his mother's apartness from all humanity, his father's surface cheerfulness and absorption in work. This, he knew, was the way people ought to live together, happy and at ease. Even after the shock of the first time his grandfather came back drunk from a race meeting, he believed that. The belief did not change, except to become desperate.

The pattern grew familiar, as did his own reaction. It was one of mixed anticipation and fearful apprehension. From the moment his grandfather went off in the morning, all was different. She would do a special treat for his dinner, brew the chicory-flavoured coffee whose smell deliciously permeated the house, make the flat cakes of soda bread which he loved. And more important than all that was the closeness, the extra squeezes and caresses, the realization that for these few hours it was he who met her deep need for love, and fulfilled it. At ordinary times she was fond and kind, but now, abandoned, smarting where she had thought herself accustomed to the hurt, she turned hungrily to him, and he glowed with that.

The best of it was after tea when, with the day's work done and his grandfather's supper keeping in the oven, she told him the tales. Sometimes they were of relations or people she had known—stories

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strange and fanciful and often grim, like the one about the aunt who married into the Protestants and when she died, the boys twice dug up her body at night, leaving it once at the cross-roads and once on her husband's doorstep—but more often they were of wonders, of the leprechaun and the banshee and the little folk of Connemara, which had been her home as a girl. Those were his favourites. He would listen, sitting on the rug with his head against her knee, with the hiss of the kettle on the hob, and the cats asleep, seeking the glow of the fire even in the summer. So, listening, he would grow sleepy himself, too sleepy sometimes to have his cocoa and biscuits. Afterwards he would lie in his bed, watching the bats dart across the grey-blue square of sky, and think of all the things she had told him.

And later still, there would be his grandfather's drunken return, smashing the reverie, perhaps waking him from sleep. The voice shouting or singing in the distance, the heavy floundering footsteps, the banging and crashing, and his grandmother's voice, protesting and the roared answers—ugly in volume, ugly in tone, ugly above all in that every other word almost was that word which he knew to be terrible, the currency of the Dublin slums. And his grandmother's voice, louder and shriller:

"Think of the boy up there, if you won't think of me! Will you talk filth like that when a boy can hear it?"

And the savage answer, laced with the same obscenity, that he would talk the way he liked under his own roof, that the boy was his own grandson, and would need to grow up to be a man who would have something to say for himself, and not be put under by women—To and fro, surge and countersurge, till he wanted to scream, half from a need to stop them, half to join in. And finally the lumbering progress to bed, and her sobs, and so something like peace.

The next day there would be a silence, almost as bad, short replies to anything he said, his grandmother withdrawn and brooding, his grandfather making awkward gestures at reconciliation and then stomping out to the animals. And the day after all would be well. Until it happened again, in two weeks' time or three.

But even after he grew to dread all this, he still looked forward to race days, to the smell of coffee, the day at once peaceful and exciting, to the stories about the little people. The serenity was there, and the magic, even though the night must come to sully them. This went on from year to year until, between one visit and the next, his grandmother died, and he dreamt that night of her body being dug up by the little people and set up in the doorway of the farm-

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house when his grandfather was coming back drunk from the races. He screamed then, and woke himself with screaming.

He did not think of the stories after that. They ended badly, as most things did. He drank heavily as a young man, in sessions lasting for days on end, and then, by an act of will, stopped completely. Until these last few days. Now there was this revelation, a triumph of good over evil, calm day over monstrous night. He was dazed by it, and exalted.

Wait, Mat thought, and whatever was to happen would happen. He felt happy most of the time, only occasionally tired and sad. The suggestion of the night watch and his own participation in it he accepted with the same lack of interest. The English, he thought with unsmiling mirth, and the Americans and the Germans. They would chase ghosts with butterfly nets.

When there was the commotion from below stairs, he assumed that was what was happening—that, with their nerves frayed by the dark and the quiet, they were flailing the empty air. Even when they came up, Waring shouting in his excitement, he was sure that it was a flurry about nothing. He was sure until he saw her, so small in the clutch of Daniel's hands. She was the way his grandmother had described her, even to wearing the green. It was not possible—it could not be possible—that she had been caught like a rat in a corner. And yet there was nothing else that was possible, nothing at all.

What followed was worse. He stood by in silence while they talked and argued. Helen asked him to try talking to the little one in Gaelic, and he stared at her with mute contempt until Cherry asked him, too. She made no answer: why should she? There was only a dull surprise when Stefan spoke in German, and the small lips moved, replying. They went on, putting questions to her, debating it among themselves, and it was all meaningless. He even contributed a couple of remarks himself, hearing the emptiness of his own voice. The world had jarred out of gear again, and nothing mattered.

And yet, he found, something did. His anger stirred with the talk of newspapers, rose higher with the interchange between the Selkirks. Scientists, he thought with horror and disgust, and circuses. He told himself to stay silent, to ignore them all, but in the end burst out. He parodied their arguments and mocked them, and beneath the mocking there was the bitterness of knowing that he meant what he said. All the time the little one rested in Cherry's arms, watching. It was not until Cherry said: "She can come to bed with me," that he was shamed.

He left to go upstairs while they

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were still talking about how to keep her trapped for the night. He poured himself a strong whiskey in his bedroom, drank it, and poured another. The anodyne did not fail him. Closing his mind on what had happened, he began to get undressed.

Cherry came in with no more than a flick of her fingers on the door. He was naked apart from his underpants. He felt the shame of being a comic sight, and of her seeing him, and the shame of her embarrassment. But she was not embarrassed. She stood in front of him with the faint pure smile on her face, so innocent that embarrassment could not touch her. She said:

"I wanted to be with you again."

He wondered how he could ever have thought of her as dull. It was just that she was simple and direct, a contrast to Bridget's smiling complexity. He felt a great need to protect and comfort her. But he could not stay awake in the chair another night. He said:

"I'm tired, Cherry."

She nodded, accepting that. "Can I just kiss you good night?"

She did not wait for his answer, but came to him and, standing on tiptoe, pressed herself to him and tightened her arms round him, her fingers hard against his naked back. Her face turned up to him was open and trustful, like a child's.

He kissed her lips very quickly, just brushing them with his own. Then he took her arms, gently broke her hold, and stood back.

"Good night," he said. "Sleep well."

XI

Stefan was surprised that in the discussion about the little Greta, and the fact that she spoke German, no reference was made to the journal. The degree of probability that a connection existed between the two things must be very high. He realized, though, that Bridget might be the only one who knew of the journal—there had been no-one else present during their conversation about it—and certainly for her it had held no importance. Nor had he discussed it with her since. He did not raise the subject while the others were arguing, from a reticence that he only partly understood. It concerned his feeling for the man who had written those lines, lonely and far from home. It might be necessary eventually to talk about him, but he wished to avoid it as long as possible. There was also the second volume which he had found that morning in the tower and not yet read. He was all the more eager to read it now, but he wanted time to reflect on it in private.

Hanni was asleep, and did not wake when he went up. He undressed quickly, and got into bed. Settling himself, he drew the book towards him, and opened it.

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"It has rained almost continuously for three days, not heavily but with a thin monotony that tires the soul. I have not been out today at all. After lunch I sat a long time in front of the fire which Mrs. Rafferty had banked up high. The coals glowed bright yellow, almost white, and I remembered being a child and believing that a salamander lived there in that scorching splendour, and wondering what it must be like for him when the fire burned low, and if he died shivering among the dull embers, the cooling ash.

"I awoke in the night again with the sharp pain in my stomach. I took one of the pills, and it eased after a time, but it was long before I got to sleep. One cannot help wondering that it may be serious. This doctor here is plainly a fool, his usefulness to his patients on a level with water from Lourdes and the priest's prayers. It would be sensible to go to someone in Dublin or, better, Berlin. From that point of view sensible, from another an unwarranted risk.

"It would have been V's birthday tomorrow. I do not think about it, but I remember it all the same. She had such great courage.

"The rain comes down still. The damp cold of this country is in my bones. I am a salamander: the world grows chill about me."

Stefan read on. There were dates of days and months, but no years; nevertheless, this volume plainly was written after the other one. The note of melancholy was more marked and more frequently evident. He wrote less about his work and its importance in keeping him active and contented. It was almost as though he were disillusioned with it. Near the middle there was a passage concerning it.

"News on the radio that Frausig has been given the Nobel. Little chubby Frausig, with his passion for white sausages. He can eat them by the hundred thousand now, if he wishes. He and I were the only ones in our year that Merkenheimer accepted as showing promise—and my promise was the greater. I chose the wrong field. Nonetheless, under other circumstances—if it had been possible to publish—my fame would have been enormous. I do not believe that I mind not having that. What I mind is that the work itself, from so incredible an achievement, must dwindle into ordinary observation, such as any third-rate naturalist could carry out. I go on, keeping the record. After I am dead, perhaps . . . There will be objections, inevitably, but the greatness of the accomplishment must be recognized. The papers are there. One day they may be published."

Stefan was very tired: the spiky letters danced in front of his eyes. He read more quickly, taking in the gist only. He could read it more carefully another time. But

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there was a page near the end which, having glanced over, he paused and re-read.

"F. and G. both running temperatures this morning, F. flushed and lethargic, G. complaining of throat, both refusing food. It seems almost certain that they have the feverish cold which I contracted last week from S. Without his trips, we would be free of this nuisance, isolated as we are. This is the first time any of them have taken the germ. I suppose I could have prevented it by wearing a mask. As it is, it is of minor interest. It will be interesting to see if it develops in the others also."

Stefan closed the book. F. and G. Greta? "I could have prevented it by wearing a mask." So S.—who would be Seamus—was not in contact with them, whoever they were. The little people in the tower room, speaking German. *Der Grosse*, she had said—only one. But the one might have changed. After the chronicler died and Seamus had the place to himself, he must have gone up to the tower room and taken over. But not, any longer, in a spirit of scientific experiment. Instead they became toys to a middle-aged man, a means, along with whiskey, of passing the lonely years.

And the papers—the record of the great accomplishment? What had he done with those? Burned them, most likely. They would mean nothing to him.

Stefan awoke in the early morning. The light was still on, the journal lying where he had dropped it on his bed. He had vague memories of a troubled night and bad dreams. Hanni was sleeping peacefully. He looked at his watch and saw that it was not long after six o'clock. Time enough to sleep again himself.

The papers, he thought. Seamus might have burned them, but he had not burned the journals, or, at least, not all of them. In which case . . . It came back sharply to him: there had been papers in the file from which he had taken that second volume. And there had been other boxes amongst the rubbish whose contents might have been similar. It would be worth while to investigate them.

There was no one about in the house, no sound except for the heart-beat of the generator. Stefan went downstairs to the kitchen and found the key to the tower. It was big and heavy, with the satisfying massiveness of keys to locked doors in fairy tales. He weighed it in his hand for a moment. What story? He found he could only think of Bluebeard, which was absurd. He closed the kitchen door behind him, grinning. Then he remembered he would need the torch, and went back to get it.

He had a moment of wondering whether he might surprise others of the little people by going down into the tower at this unexpected

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hour, but the sound of his footsteps echoing from the walls of the staircase demonstrated the unlikelihood of that; if they were about they would have plenty of time to scatter. All the same, he flashed the beam of the torch ahead as he reached the foot of the stairs. There was nothing there but bare dripping walls and the glimpse, through the doorway, of the pile of junk. The light hit on the cheval mirror and briefly dazzled.

His first objective was the file from which he had taken the book. The papers were jumbled, some typewritten, some covered in the spiky handwriting which by now he knew so well. He picked one out. It was headed "Report on Trials of Stearan with Seven Dogs."

He took the file through to the library, tipped the papers out on the table, and drew up a chair. Some that should have been clipped together had come apart. He started trying to sort them out in some sort of order, but while doing so his eye caught a sentence on a page, and he paused to take in its context. He read the whole of that page, and after putting it down stared for some time into the distance. His chair faced the window, and he looked across the lawn to the walled garden, the wildness of the bog, the far hills. The air was clear and still, a bright morning of a bright day.

After that he read the papers methodically, but in no order. Some he could only partly understand, others hardly at all, and they were not in chronological sequence, which confused things further. But a picture emerged. He had been right to think the solution might lie here. When he had read the last of the papers, he dropped his head to the table. The wood was cool and hard against his face. He thought of Old Lonely, white and clear in the days of his boyhood, mantled with the purity of snow, limned against blue heaven.

He thought, too, of the last meeting, across a bare table in a cell, an armed American guard a few feet away staring contemptuously at the wall above their heads. It was not the change in his physical appearance that had been so shocking, though he had aged so much. What he could hardly bear to look at was the helplessness, the pitiable weakness in one whose strength had been beyond doubt or question. He put his hand out, and his father took it, and there were tears in the blue eyes, and the fingers trembled as they pressed on his.

His father said: "I am sorry."

The silence filled the cell, pressing on both of them. He tried to find words, but what words were there? At last, he managed to say:

"Is there anything I can do, Father?"

"No."

"Any message to give anyone?"

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The white head shook in negation. There was a scar on the side of his face which was new. It was known that prisoners were roughly handled, occasionally tortured. Some of the American guards were Jews. He felt on his mind the unbearable weight of not being able to be angry, the sickness of acquiescence.

His father said: "There is no one to give a message to now. No one except you." He paused, searching, as helpless to express himself, Stefan saw, as he had been. "And I can think of no message that I can give you."

"It doesn't matter."

The silence came down again. Desperately Stefan wished that the American would do something—shift his feet—to make some noise, but he continued to gaze blankly ahead.

His father said: "One thing. My property is confiscated—you know that. Nothing comes to you. But what your mother left is separate, and cannot be touched. Lasser will be writing to you about it."

"I do not want it."

The words came out more roughly than he had intended. His father's grasp on his hand weakened as he spoke. After a moment, his father said:

"It is not mine, and never has been. It came from her father, your grandfather. He was a surgeon, as you know. It is clean money. She would wish you to have it."

Stefan said: "I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for." The blue eyes searched his, and he forced himself to look back. "One thing."

"Yes?"

"You might be allowed to come again. Do not. Go away, if you can. Do not read newspapers or listen to the radio. In a few weeks it will have happened, but for us it happens now, when you go out through that door. This is easier for me, also. Do you understand?"

There, for a moment or two, the strength came back, and all this, which he had accepted, turned into a grotesque nightmare, something which even the dreamer knew to be a dream. But as he nodded, his father's shoulders dropped—the hands, after one last pressure, released their hold. The nightmare, he knew again, was real.

He had done, he remembered, as his father had asked, wandering for nearly two months through the stinking ruins of the Reich. During that time he had met Hanni, who had lived out the war, untouched but insecure, in the care of her Aryan uncle and aunt. They were married before the snows covered the rubble. The previous day he had told her of his father, and she had nodded her dark unknown head, in acceptance.

He said: "This does not shock you?"

"I recognized the name. I

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thought it might be—some relation."

"And you can bear it? Bear taking on that name yourself?"

She paused before she said: "You could have seen him again. Why didn't you?"

"He told me not to."

"That was for your sake. You should have gone."

With some bitterness, he said: "It was his order. I always obeyed his orders. I was a good son, a German son."

"You should have gone to him."

He stared at her in wonder. "How can you be so saint-like?"

She shook her head. "It is not that."

But it had been that, he knew, which pardoned him, brought him from despair and gave him a justification for going on living. In her, and her alone, lay his absolution. And yet this knowledge faded. At first he sought its renewal. On the anniversary of their wedding he asked her: "Do you hate me for what I am?" And she smiled at him, and said: "I love you, always," and he believed her and was comforted. But it did not become easier to believe, as the years went by. This, he understood, was not because of any change in her, but through the sapping and deepening of his own despair. It was impossible that she should love him, tainted as he was, and so each avowal was a lie, made for the sake of keeping the peace, or even out of fear. There had been times when he had imputed still worse motives to her, the thought of which, in more balanced moments, sickened him. It was easier to stop demanding assurances, easier to live with unspoken rejection.

Stefan stared across the wilderness to the sun-sharpened hills. Had it all the time been simple goodness, simple love, and was there enough in that to forgive and absorb all evil?

Bridget said: "Tell me, then. Whatever it is you know."

He had taken the other key from the kitchen, had gone to the cloakroom and opened up the hamper. She had been lying on the cushions, but awake, and when she stared up at him he had wondered how he could have missed seeing it before. Small though the features were, the lines were unmistakable. He had no idea how long he had stayed there before Bridget came through the door. All that time there was silence between him and his small accuser.

He said: "I found papers in the tower. Among them the certificate of a marriage, in 1929, between Veronica Chauncey, of Cork, and Karl Hofricht of Munich."

She screwed her face up, remembering something from long ago.

"Veronica . . . Grandfather spoke of her, but not much. She

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was his sister. She sided with Sean when the two brothers fell out. And she married a German? Do you mean, the diary . . .? The man who wrote it was my uncle?"

"It seems so."

"But she was never here?"

"She died in Germany, before the war. Of cancer, I think."

She looked down again at Greta. "You said you knew about the little people—about their parentage. You're not trying to tell me that this is something to do with them?"

"Not with them. Him only. Except that perhaps her death led him to the study of growth, both normal and abnormal. And affected him, perhaps, in other ways."

"Study? You mean, he was some kind of a scientist? But how could he work here?"

"He did his main work in Germany."

"And had you heard of him? Was he famous?"

He shook his head. "Not famous."

"Growth," she said. There was a pause. "And lack of growth? He was responsible for the little people?"

"Yes. He was responsible."

"But how could he be? No one would be allowed to conduct experiments of that sort on human beings in any civilized country."

He said heavily: "I agree. But she is older than you think, you see. She was born in 1944. In Germany."

"The Nazis . . ."

"He had a laboratory hidden away in the Schwarzwald. It was a nursing home before he took over. He was not short of funds, I think. They supported him well from Berlin. Cytology is a wide field, and can be made to cover many things. Ageing, for example. There is a report which bears that out. Perhaps someone thought he could make Hitler live as long as the thousand-year Reich. Perhaps he thought so himself, or was merely willing to deceive them while he continued with the work which interested him. At any rate, they sent him money and equipment. And everything he needed to further his experiments."

"Everything? Prisoners?"

"Guinea-pigs and white rats. And cats and dogs. And Jews. Or Jewesses."

Bridget was silent, staring at Greta. After a few moments, he went on, speaking precisely, unemotionally, because no other way of saying it was possible:

"There was a screening point, at a camp. Females coming through were tested for pregnancy. If they were pregnant, and at the right stage, they were sent to him. It had to be an early stage, you understand. It seems there was a—a critical moment."

"What did he do?" She added quickly: "Unless it's too awful."

Stefan said: "There are many papers, and a lot of them I do not

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understand. He had discovered a drug, which he called Stearan. You remember thalidomide? There was a critical moment for that, also. Past a certain stage of pregnancy, it did not harm the child in the womb. But when it was taken at a certain point of development some limbs did not grow, so that the child might be born without fingers, or without arms or legs. A local effect, one might say. This other was general. Growth is controlled by the pituitary gland, or by a part of it—the anterior lobe. It was this that the drug affected, and permanently. The two-month foetus is a fish, or a reptile, but the four-month foetus is almost a miniature of humanity. For more than half its time in the womb, it hardly changes except to grow. These did not grow. At birth they were only a few inches in length, less than five hundred grammes in weight."

Bridget said: "But why?"

The simplicity of the question was self-defeating. Saying it would not help her to understand, but all the same he tried.

"Because to be a scientist is to be human still, and the grown man keeps much of the child. There is curiosity in all children, an urge to pointless destructiveness in many. Most people do not hold strong standards: they do as their society advises them, or conditions them. The society in which he lived . . ."

He had been speaking as flatly as possible, but he found that suddenly he could not go on. He put his hands up to his face, feeling the tears well against his fingers. A blind man lives in a world of horrors, smiles and is happy, not knowing what surrounds him, what he accepts. Given sight, he does not want to live. But finds strength to do so, because the horrors are done with and dead, and were not—he tells himself, his fault. Also, there are good things in the world, which he now sees more clearly—things of light and hope. And yet, long years after, the horrors are alive still, and part of him.

Bridget said: "What happened to the mothers?"

"After giving birth, they were returned to the camps."

"To be murdered?"

"What else?"

"And he kept the children. I still don't understand how they came here."

"He left Germany in '44 and went to Spain. They gave him papers and, one supposes, money. This could not have been Hitler, but presumably one of the others, who could conceive of the war being lost and had made his own plans to survive defeat. Perhaps Bormann? For him, as for all men, old age lay ahead, and the man who could produce a race of little people might also create Methuselahs. From Spain, he must have

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come here. They were neutral countries, both Catholic, and there was some commerce between them."

"With the children?"

"One supposes so. It would not be difficult. They could be drugged for the journey, and they would not weigh much or take up much space. Once here, he would make contact with his cousin by marriage, your relation also. One does not know what story he told him, but one knows he had money. So Seamus bought this house, and the two of them lived here, and in the end died here."

"How pointless."

"Is that not true of most lives? Probably Hofricht felt that somewhere, at some time, he would be able to relaunch his experiments. In some dictator country in South America, perhaps, where an ageing tyrant could be persuaded into giving his support. Perhaps he made overtures, discreetly, and was rebuffed. Meanwhile, he could observe the little people. A coda to the great work, but part of it."

"The great work!" Bridget said.

"Yes."

He felt a great weariness. The problem had been solved, a dreadful line drawn under the answer. He wanted to sleep and, thinking of that, thought of Hanni upstairs in bed. With a fresh wave of sickness he realized that telling the story now had been nothing. He must still tell it to her.

XII

Helen awoke as he was getting dressed. She asked:

"What's the hurry? It's early yet."

"I'm going down to see if Greta's still there, and O.K."

"My God, I'd forgotten." She pushed the sheets back and got out of bed. "Wait for me."

They ran into Daniel on the stairs, and found Stefan with Bridget in the cloak-room. He saw at once that Greta was still there, her little face surveying them all impassively. Stefan, on the other hand, was showing a lot of emotion. He excused himself almost right away, and when he had gone Bridget told them the story she had heard from him. They listened in silence. When she had finished, Daniel said:

"Do you think it's true?"

"He said the papers are in the library."

"I think we ought to go and have a look at them."

"They'll be in German."

"We can probably get something out of them, even so. And we might as well take her out of here."

Bridget put her arms down to the little one. She neither responded, nor cowered away, but allowed herself to be picked up and carried. Bridget talked to her, telling her not to worry, that no one was going to hurt her. The tiny features did not change.

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They found the papers scattered over the table in the library. Waring, like Bridget, had a smattering of German. The papers were there, and they related to experiments involving pregnant women.

Daniel asked: "What do you make of them?"

"Not much. But they're here, aren't they, and there's no reason why Stefan should make up that kind of story. I guess we have to take it as true."

Bridget said: "I don't understand how the news didn't come out, after the war. Wouldn't there be captured documents, and all that?"

Daniel said: "Not necessarily. Stefan seems to think it was a private show, probably dependent for funds on one man, and answerable only to him. Not all the relevant documents were captured, by a long chalk. On the other hand, Hofricht's continuing to hide out here makes it look as though something did turn up, or he was afraid it might. But it need not have been anything more than evidence that experiments were conducted on human beings. It's quite likely that he kept the results even from his man in Berlin. After all, the funds were intended for work on preventing ageing, not creating a race of pixies."

Helen was unusually subdued, Waring thought. She had made no comment on the story Bridget told them, and said hardly a word since. He wondered whether the inhumanity or the humanity had shocked her more—the experiments, or the realization that there was no magic here after all. He was conscious of a conflict in himself, between horror and relief. But the horror was long past, and done with. There were limits to human sympathy, none to the delight of discovery. He felt a fierce cupidity, which he knew he must dissemble. He had to have this one, and the others, to study. He said:

"We're still going to have to decide what to do about them."

Daniel said: "Which brings us back to our discussion last night, or early this morning. We now know that Mat's fine peroration was exactly and legally right. She is human, and has human rights. As far as nationality goes, I can visualize something of a three-way tussle between Germany, Eire and the State of Israel, but on the personal level she has to be accepted as independent."

"O.K." Waring said. "But discovery confers responsibility, wouldn't you say? We can't throw her into the sea of twentieth century life without making sure she can swim, or at any rate has some kind of life belt." Cherry came in from the corridor, and he smiled at her and got her faint but transforming smile in reply. "What I mean is, no newspaper reporters, no television camera men. Not yet anyway. We agreed on that?"

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Daniel said: "I imagine we are agreed. Though there may be difficulties." He glanced at Bridget. "Mrs. Malone, for instance, and Mary."

"I think they'll be all right," Bridget said.

She had put Greta on the table, from where she watched them with the same impassiveness. Cherry now came towards her. She put her hands down, and the small arms opened to her.

Bridget said: "She remembers you!"

It was a contact, Waring thought, which gave them all a glow of pleasure. Cherry swung the little one up into her embrace. She said:

"The first thing is to give her some food. All she would have last night was water. What's the German for breakfast, Pop?"

"*Fruhstuck.*"

Cherry bent her head down, "*Fruhstuck,* Greta. O.K.?"

The dark head nodded. It was a contact, all right. But there was, Waring noted, no answering smile.

Among the equipment Bridget had laid in for possible use by guests was a baby's feeder chair which could be hooked on the back of an ordinary one. It was still grotesquely large for Greta, but the addition of a couple of books provided her with a seat within the seat which she could manage. Her approach to food and drink was entirely reasonable and natural; she tasted or sipped and then ate and drank, for her size, heartily. Bridget put before her scrambled eggs and chopped kidneys on a coffee saucer, with a silver spoon from the salt cellar. She coped almost as well with the matter of drinking coffee from a liqueur glass. It was proportionately larger and she handled it more clumsily, drawing her hand back from the heat at first and returning to it as soon as Bridget had put in more cold milk.

Mrs. Malone was not assisting in the serving of the unusual meal; she had even refused Bridget's offer to show her Greta. Bridget had told her and Mary of what had happened, and of the need for present secrecy. The girl had apparently accepted the situation more easily than the woman, perhaps because she understood it less. For her the story of experiments and strange births meant nothing beside the living presence of legend. But Mrs. Malone, Waring noted, was acutely, tremblingly afraid.

Although he watched all this with interest, Waring was inwardly preoccupied with more important things. He had no doubts as to the rightness of the course of action he proposed—it was nonsense to think of letting them out of the care of properly qualified observers, for years, if ever—but he was fully aware of the delicacy that

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would be needed in bringing it about. His first notion, of a trans-Atlantic telephone call to Dean Matthews, he had reluctantly rejected. A trans-Atlantic call, outside Dublin at any rate, was something that would attract interest and probably eavesdropping, and Matthews was a man who would need to have it all spelled out to him, probably three or four times, before he would initiate any kind of action. Moreover, if he did fly over, his intervention, as an American, along with the fact that Waring had betrayed the secret, would have the worst kind of effect. Short of a kidnapping operation, which would neither be practical nor do any good, they would only be ensuring the reverse of his intentions.

He brooded over the problem throughout breakfast, regretting his own lack of imagination. The situation needed a creative approach, which he realized he lacked. And yet it was unthinkable that the little people should be handed over either to an Irish government official or the exploitation of the publicity machines, which were, he clearly saw, the only alternatives to his own project. A way out had to be found and on that instant, despairing of finding one, he thought of McGredy, and wondered how he could have missed seeing it before.

That was it, exactly. No American take-over bogey: Sir Patrick McGredy lived in London, was a Fellow of the Royal Society and talked of as the next President. He was world-famous as a biologist, a TV screen and after-dinner speaker, and a man of integrity. Although not a pacifist, he had refused to be nominated for the Nobel Prize on the grounds that the Award derived originally from a tainted source: no man should take profit, even at several removes, from instruments of death and destruction. Moreover as a graduate of Trinity and a supporter, in his salad days, of the Revolution, he was even more revered in Ireland than in England. There could be no objection to McGredy, and there was bound to be tolerance over admitting him to the secret.

He was also a subtle and imaginative man. Waring had met him on two or three occasions, and they had got on well. He would not need to be bludgeoned into dropping things and coming over; a hint would be enough. It was, Waring admitted, a further consideration that he was entirely scrupulous about the rights of prior discoverers and colleagues. He would respect Waring's special position. It would be co-operation, not domination.

McGredy was the answer. The only remaining question was when and how he was to be brought in. He had to get hold of the telephone when he was sure of not being overheard. That might not be easy, and going into the village to tele-

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phone would attract attention. The main consideration was to avoid rushing things. It would keep, for a day or two if necessary.

He looked up to see Mat coming into the dining room; he also saw, and was pleased by, the affectionate exchange of glances between Cherry and him. The Morwitzes followed close on his heels. Stefan was holding his wife's arm, and she looked pale and uncertain. Hanni stopped at the sight of Greta, and he stopped with her. Her mouth quivered, and the tears came, a silent flooding from her eyes which she made no attempt to disguise or wipe away. They stood like that for a moment or two, with no one willing or able to say anything. Then Stefan put his arm around her shoulders and, turning, led her out.

Hanni stayed in her room that morning, but Stefan came down again, though he would not have anything to eat. He explained that his wife was not feeling well. He did not look well himself. One could understand that, Waring thought—German, and with a wife at least partly Jewish—but sympathy was subordinate to a more urgent consideration: they needed him to communicate properly with the little one. He put this to Daniel, who agreed. Daniel did the asking, allowing Waring to stay, as he wished, in the background. Stefan, drinking a black coffee, nodded his head, with neither enthusiasm nor reluctance.

"I will talk to her for you."

They got him to repeat the assurances that she would be well cared for, and in no danger. This Greta accepted with no change in her impassiveness. The next part, Waring judged, was going to be the tricky one. Daniel proposed, and Stefan passed on the suggestion in German, that it would be a good idea for the rest of the little people to come out of hiding. She listened carefully and answered in shrill quicksilver tones. Stefan said:

"She agrees. She will call them for you."

"And they will come out?"

He shrugged. "It seems so."

Daniel considered that. "I suppose we ought just to let her go and bring them, if we're to treat her as human and an equal."

Waring said quickly: "I'm not in favour of that. We don't know how they're likely to treat her, for one thing."

"In what way?"

"We know, or we're pretty sure, that the antecedents are human, but we know nothing about them as they are. She seems quite intelligent, but things like behavior patterns . . . We have absolutely no data on that. And remember they've not been raised as humans, but first as special laboratory animals, later as playthings. If she just goes back—they might harm

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her, in the way some animals do with one of their kind that's acquired an alien taint."

Cherry said: "Do you think they would harm her?"

"Surely she would know that," Mat said. "As you said, she's intelligent."

"*Seems* intelligent," Waring said. "And the position's an entirely new one for her. She's bound to be disorientated."

Helen said: "Let her go."

It was the old automatic opposition and defiance, but there was less heart in it. She was still depressed and quiet.

Daniel said: "I think Waring's right. We need to go carefully. Stefan, tell her we'll come down to the cellar with her. Can she call them from there?"

They spoke together again. Stefan said:

"Not the cellar here. In the tower. They will come from there, she says."

"Fair enough," Daniel said. "We might as well go right away, if there's no objection. Are you carrying her, Cherry?"

Cherry nodded. Waring said:

"Hold her tight, sweetheart, in case she gets frightened, and jumps."

Cherry smiled. "She won't. *Nicht wahr*, Greta?"

The little face looked up at her, blank but incurious. Waring felt a sudden prickle of uncertainty, almost of apprehension. What he had said—about knowing so little of her, her mental processes and behaviour—had been off the cuff, its simple object the frustration of the suggestion that she should be let go. But, of course, it was literally true. Humanity was not merely a genetic inheritance, but the product of mixing that with a culture built up over a hundred thousand generations. And a culture predicated on a certain minimum height. It was impossible to guess how important that one factor could be.

He adjusted his spectacles on his nose. Uncertainty, yes—that was reasonable. Apprehension was nonsense.

Bridget was busy seeing to things and Hanni was in her room. The rest of them trooped down the stairs in the tower, Daniel and Mat with the torches, Cherry carrying Greta and talking nonsense to her in a low voice. Waring wondered how she would call them, and if they would really come. The previous night, reality had followed too close on cynical disbelief for there to be any build-up of excitement, but he felt it now, a tingle in the blood. Would they come? He wanted it too desperately to believe it.

Greta and Stefan spoke together again, and he said:

"We need to go to the place that is flooded. They have hidden themselves beyond that."

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Daniel said: "How do they get across? Swim? It's a couple of feet deep."

Stefan did not bother to pass on the query. They were almost there. The light, flashed ahead, found the oily blackness of the water. In a moment they were by the doorway.

Daniel said: "All right, Cherry. Put her down."

"No!" Waring said. "She can call while you hold her."

Cherry, not answering, stooped, and he saw her set Greta gently down on the stone flags. Waring had an impulse to snatch her up, but there were others in the way. He tensed himself to plunge if the little one attempted flight.

But she moved, with a strange graceful deliberation, only to the top of the steps that led down to the water. Her head lifted, and she called out. The cellar's resonance deepened her voice.

"Komm! Ich bin hier. Greta."

Nothing happened. How could it? They would be fools to come, Waring thought. But she was still there. Then the ray of the torch moved further out, and Helen beside him drew in breath.

Waring looked and saw it. A child's toy boat, moving across the still waters, with doll-like figures bending to the oars.

XIII

It was more raft than boat, Daniel saw—a flat piece of wood, roughly boat-shaped and about three feet in length, with crude gunwales nailed or glued in place along the edges. The oars were crude, too, one of them no more than a splinter of white wood from an orange box or the like. But his attention, after the first quick glance, was on the occupants rather than the vessel.

They were wearing green costumes, like Greta. These, in the artificial light, the spotlight surrounded by blackness, gave the scene a harsh Disney-like unreality: the cinema's ultimate 3-D achievement after all the fumblings with Cinemascope and Cinerama and the rest. Who in God's name could have dreamed up that one? Surely not the little people themselves, nor the scientific Hofricht. Seamus, then—a national dress for his puppets to wear. And it was not so unreasonable, he saw. They *were* puppets. Whatever one said about human ancestry and human rights, there was no way of taking seriously creatures bearing man's shape, but only twelve inches high.

Man's, and woman's. There were six of them, as Greta had said, five male and another female. She sat surrounded by the little men—four rowing, the fifth handling what looked like a rudder at the stern—looking directly into the light that dazzled her. And, reflecting from her, dazzled the eye of the beholder.

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She was a triumph of beauty in miniature. Greta had seemed pretty, the prettiness magnified by the scaling down which hid minor imperfections, but this one was different altogether. To start with, she was a blonde, the hair that hung loose about her shoulders a rich cornfield gold, thick and gleaming. Her eyes were dark—brown, he thought, though he could not be certain yet—large and well spaced under brows just a little darker than her hair; her face was comparatively broad, high cheekboned, the skin less pallid than Greta's, as though no amount of darkness and confinement could dim a refulgence stored from long centuries in the sun and the open. Jewish, he thought? The immediate reaction was of scepticism, but he had seen this kind of Jewish beauty before, in refugees from the great snowy burning plains of Russia and Poland; though never such a beauty as this.

The boat reached the steps, grating against the stone, and Daniel stooped down, putting his hand out to her. She did not flinch nor draw back, but lifted her arms. His hand embraced her waist, and she looked up, fearlessly, into darkness as he raised her. Through the dress his fingers felt the throbbing warmth of her body, the curves of hip and breast. He straightened up, holding her. They could look at one another now. She stared at him with no change of expression. Her mouth was wide, the lips red and slightly parted, showing even teeth. Parted, but not in a smile; it was a look of calm regard.

They had the open trust of puppies, not merely permitting themselves to be lifted and carried, but expecting it. The hesitancies were on the part of the others. Cherry scooped up one of the men, along with Greta, and Waring also picked one up. Mat, after a moment, followed suit. Helen and Stefan simply stared down at them, their expressions, in the darkness and shifting torchlight, impossible to read. Two small men remained, standing on the steps. There was a cord attached to the stem of the boat, Daniel saw, and a nail low down in the doorway which had probably been used as a mooring post; but they had not bothered to secure it and the boat was starting to drift away. They were unconcerned about this. From skulking in the dark holes of cellars, sneaking out at night to steal food and other necessaries, they had apparently swung round to a complete unquestioning acceptance of the giants' world. It was an odd mental process, but their mental processes were bound to be odd.

Waring said to his wife: "Aren't you taking a passenger? They'll be a long time climbing up that staircase if we don't help them."

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She said: "I suppose so," and stooped to pick one up. Waring looked at Stefan, who turned away. He shrugged, and gathered the last himself. He said:

"No point in hanging on down here now. Let's take them up where we can see them properly, and talk to them."

He walked forward, one of the little men resting on the crook of each arm. Cherry giggled, and he stopped and looked back.

"Seven of them," she said. She began singing the Dwarfs' Marching Song from "Snow White." "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho! It's off to work we go . . ."

Waring took it up with her. Their voices echoed and re-echoed as they went through the cell-like rooms and onto the staircase. It was not the resonance, Daniel thought, that gave the sound a sinister note, so much as the silence, except for footfalls, of the others—the utter silence of the little people. He was relieved when they had come through the door from the tower and closed it behind them. Daylight came through the fanlights over the doors, and from the hall. It was not bright, but it was blessedly ordinary and natural.

The others headed for the library. Daniel stayed behind to push open the kitchen door and call to Bridget. She looked up across the big deal table, her hands and bare arms floured and a patch of flour on one cheek. She stared at the little creature in his arms.

"So they came . . ."

"Right away." Daniel creased his brow over the sudden improbability revealed. "Almost as though they were waiting for us."

"She's lovely," Bridget said. She shook her head, marvelling. "No. Exquisite. I've never seen anything the word properly fitted before. And the others?"

"They've taken them into the library."

"Wait till I rinse my hands. I'll come with you. Mrs. Malone, the filling's ready. Put it in the pie and pop it in the oven, will you?"

Mrs. Malone was in the far corner of the room. She stood with her back to the end of the draining board, pressing herself against it. Her face was white, and she was almost shaking with fear. Bridget, washing her hands under the running tap, said:

"Now, there's nothing to be afraid of. I've told you, they're little people, but not the kind they tell stories of. More like those in a circus. Can you see to things for a few minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her voice was choked. Bridget said:

"Pour yourself a dram of brandy if you're feeling nervous. The bottle's over there in the cupboard." She came to Daniel and touched the little one with her finger. "It's so hard to believe she's real, isn't

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it? And breathing." She slipped off her apron, and hung it up behind the door. "I want to see the others."

They stood on the big table in the library. Among the people watching them there were signs of different emotions; a wave of reactions from simple delight in the case of Cherry to Stefan's fascinated horror. These feelings showed themselves in various ways—nervous laughter or movement, Helen's voice booming, a twitch of hand or face. By contrast, the little people were completely calm, almost motionless. Their movements, when they made them, were quick enough, somehow fluid, but in between actions they were weirdly at rest. It was disconcerting. Daniel set the fair-haired beauty down with the others; she offered him one fathomless look, and turned away.

He said to Stefan: "They don't seem to need reassuring, but perhaps you'd better do that. And you can find out their names at the same time." He hesitated. "I suppose you'd better tell them ours. We have to make some sort of personal contact."

And yet it was absurd. One called a cat by name, and these were bigger than cats, or at any rate stood higher, but a cat was not human in shape and wearing clothes, and a cat did not call you back.

Stefan said, in a dry voice: "Must I?"

"You're the only one who can talk to them. Except Hanni, I suppose."

"I will do what I can."

Their voices all sounded the same. That was reasonable, Daniel supposed, since they operated in a fairly narrow band at a frequency unfamiliar to the human ear. There probably were distinctions, and one might eventually pick them up—those between the men and women, at least—but not yet. Their physical appearances were more distinguishable. One of the men stood an inch taller than his companions, and another was short and squat. The latter was called Berthold, the former Dietrich. The other three, of roughly the same height as the women, were Fritz, Christoph and Adolf. Adolf was very thin, practically emaciated, while Fritz and Christoph could be recognized by their hair, Fritz's deeply black, Christoph's blonde—a thinner, lighter colour than the golden straw of the girl Daniel had carried. Her name was Emma. The remaining men had dark brown, indistinctive hair. None of them had a beard. It was possible that they had kept their faces shaved, but more likely that they were hairless. All their skins were delicate, pale, apart from Emma's, and with the bloom of softness.

Daniel asked Stefan: "They understand that we will look after them? That there's nothing to be afraid of?"

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"I have told them." He shrugged. "They do not seem to have any fear."

This was true, and still surprising. Daniel tried to envisage himself in the charge of beings who stood higher than a house, and found his imagination would not make the leap. What was really staggering was that things had gone so easily. One could not have guessed, after capturing Greta, that the others could so easily have been persuaded to come out of hiding, nor with such seeming nonchalance. He felt his mind prickle, remembering what he had said to Bridget in the kitchen. "Almost as though they were waiting for us."

Waring had picked up Emma. She lay in the grasp of his hand, quite unperturbed, and he ran the fingers of his other hand over her.

"One would need to make proper tests," he said, "with instruments, but I have a suspicion that the pulse rate is higher, and perhaps also the body temperature. I had that feeling about Greta."

The sudden irritation he felt surprised Daniel. He found himself saying, quite sharply:

"I should put her down." Waring looked at him, in mild inquiry, but complied. A gloss, Daniel thought, was called for. He added: "There's bound to be a tendency to treat them as—well, as dolls. I think we ought to resist that."

Helen said: "He wasn't thinking of her as a doll. More as a subject for experiment." The flush of excitement had left her and her voice was dully resentful. "Don't think he's given up the idea of the great thesis on the little people. I know him."

Daniel said: "It was sensible to carry them up from the cellar, but I don't think carrying should become a habit."

"They have human rights," Mat said. His voice was melancholy and, even so early, barely perceptibly slurred. "The life stories in *Life,* with all the pictures, and a commentary by Patrick McGredy, telling how it happened." Daniel saw Waring's head jerk up, as though startled. "Their own little TV programme, once a week—a discussion panel, maybe, and they could call it 'Think Small.' Not to mention the pops. With voices like theirs they'd leave the Chipmunks standing, and the Chipmunks can't do TV except as cartoons." He put on an elborately vulgarized Irish accent: "It's a great future they have in front of them, it is, an' all, an' all." Speaking normally again, he bent down close to Emma's golden head, and whispered: "Remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

While Mat had been talking, Daniel had had time to think about his own reactions. The irritation with Waring—stemming from what? His mind supplied an answer, but it was so ludicrous that

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he could dismiss it with amusement. Jealousy? On account of a creature less than a foot high? He said:

"Something else you had better ask them, Stefan. Greta's had breakfast, but the rest are probably hungry."

They ate as willingly as Greta had done, unconcerned about surveillance. They knelt beside the coffee saucers containing scrambled egg, taking it in turns, two at a time. Bridget had found another salt-cellar spoon, and they seemed to grasp the point about lack of implements readily. Daniel wondered how they had managed before. With fingers, probably, but now they adopted this usage quite naturally. Mary, who had brought in the tray with the food, stared at them, wide-eyed and bemused but without the terror Mrs. Malone had shown. She had a child's mind. These were the creatures of her fantasies come to life; she probably jumped the gulf towards acceptance more easily than any of them. Except, he thought, the little people themselves. They drank their coffee from the liqueur glasses, with the ease and aplomb of old men drinking brandy after a good dinner.

Bridget could not stay, having the lunch to see to. The rest remained, fascinated by the little people, who were put down now from the table. They stayed in a group on the carpet, most of them standing but Emma and the short Berthold sitting, propped by one arm, with legs drawn up beneath them. Daniel and the others sat in chairs round them, and Stefan put questions for them, and relayed the answers.

The picture did not, at the outset, greatly differ from that which they had got from Greta. One of the men—Fritz—had a vague memory of a time of long darkness, but otherwise they recalled only the tower room, living in the little houses, being visited by *der Grosse*. Waring asked them if there had not been two Big Ones, but drew blankness in reply. It had always been *der Grosse*, always until the time that he fell down, making strange noises, and crawled away from them, and they took the things they needed and went down into the cellars.

"Because they were frightened?" Daniel asked.

Stefan said: "I suppose so. They do not say that." He hesitated. "It is not easy to communicate with them, you understand. Not only because of their voices, or because their speech is garbled, but because I do not think terms always means the same to them as to us."

Waring said: "They would be bound to. It's a different universe they live in. But it must have taken guts to live down there."

"I agree," Daniel said. "What about rats?"

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Cherry shuddered. "Rats!"

Stefan put a question to them. It met lack of comprehension at first, but understanding came as he explained it further. Fritz, who did more of the talking than the others, rattled off an answer. Stefan said:

"Yes. They did not know the name, but there were rats. They killed them."

"God Almighty!" Waring said. The awe in his voice, Daniel thought, was well justified. "Size for size, that's something like tackling tigers. And in the dark. And with what kind of weapons? The missing pen-knife, maybe. Ask them what weapons they used, Stefan."

His question drew another blank. The reply he got when he put it another way seemed to baffle him.

Waring said impatiently: "Well?"

"He says—whips."

"Whips? I don't get it."

Daniel saw that Fritz was observing the interchange, and appeared to have grasped Waring's bewilderment. The little one's own face remained expressionless, but with a quick sure movement he put his hands inside his belt and stripped off the green shirt. Naked from the waist up, he offered his back to Waring's scrutiny. The whiteness was seamed with thin dark lines that crossed each other. Without the reference to whips, Daniel did not think he would have recognized the marks. As it was, the implications were plain, though still not making sense.

Waring said: "Rats don't . . ." Breaking off, he leaned forward to pick Fritz up. He looked closely at the bared back. "Scars," he said. "From whippings? But how? They whipped each other? Some kind of ceremony? Initiation, maybe?"

As though taking a cue from their leader, the rest of the little people were stripping off their upper clothing. Greta undid a fastener at the front of her dress, and slipped first one shoulder out and then the other. All their backs carried the cross-hatchings that they had seen on Fritz's. Only Emma, Daniel saw, did not join in this display, but stood, austere and beautiful, watching the others. Daniel heard a shocked exclamation from Cherry, something like a groan from Mat. They were all shocked, as he was himself.

"Aber warum?" Stefan whispered. *"Warum?"*

Waring put Fritz down with the rest. He chattered on, in high fast silvery tones, and Stefan listened. He put occasional questions, and waited for the answers. At last he turned from the little one, but did not look at anyone else. His gaze fixed on the window, he said:

"It was a misunderstanding. They used the whips to harry the rats, but I still do not know how

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they killed them." He spoke like someone very tired, or sick at heart. "When I was puzzled, he thought I did not know what the word meant, just as they do not know what some of my words mean. They have left the whips behind, in the cellar. So they tried to explain by showing the marks on their backs."

Helen said: "But why? What are you trying to tell us? That they're a bunch of sado-masochists?"

Stefan said: "Sometimes he whipped them himself. More usually, he compelled them to whip each other."

"He?" Helen said.

"Der Grosse."

"Seamus." Mat said quietly: "May his soul rot in Hell forever."

"There were other—torments," Stefan said. His voice had a dreadful blankness. "I did not seek the details. But Fritz spoke of being squeezed in the hand, crushed to the point of unconsciousness."

Waring looked at the palm of his open hand, and from that to the black-haired Fritz who stared up at him from the carpet.

"And after that," he said, "they came into our hands quite willingly—with no signs of fear? How could they?"

Daniel said: "It amazes me, too. One can see why they ran, as soon as they found a door open with no one to guard it, and why they hid in the dark. But surely, after that, they could never make willing contact with the human race again."

The human race, he thought. I am still making a distinction. But could any group of human beings have done that?

Cherry said: "It was because of Greta. She knew we were different, that we would not harm them."

Waring objected. "But she had had no chance to tell them."

"She called them," Cherry said. "That was enough. She would not have called to them to come if there had been any danger. Can't you see? They trust each other."

"I suppose," Waring said doubtfully, "they could have got as far as the cloakroom door during the night, and while they could not get her out, they could talk to her."

"Trust," Cherry said. She was looking at the little people, her face more animated than Daniel had seen it. "They have complete trust. No arguments, no rows—just knowing that no ones going to let anyone else down. Knowing it."

Daniel saw Waring glance at his daughter, and look away. If she were right, he thought, the distinction was a valid one, and worth bearing in mind. Not human. Most certainly, not human.

For lunch, Bridget had found an arrangment which permitted dining *en masse*. She had brought a card table into the dining room, and put a very short-legged coffee

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table on top of it. Books made bench seats for the little people, and the men made do with coffee spoons, which were large for them but not entirely unwieldy. She had put their meat through a mincer and crumbled their potatoes, but left the peas whole. It was fascinating to watch them eating these, one at a time.

Hanni had not come down, and Stefan had taken lunch for her up to their room and stayed with her. The atmosphere was a cheerful, light-hearted one. The things which had shocked and disgusted them earlier had been put behind, not forgotten but ignored. Stefan was absent, and Mat gave the impression of savouring, to some extent sharing, Cherry's simple delight in the little ones. They, as usual, showed no particular emotion, but their imperturbability had in part a mirror surface: it reflected ease and high spirits now as earlier it had reflected incredulity and nausea. Reflected, Daniel thought, and heightened. It was almost as though, themselves without vagaries, they were a catalyst to the run of human feelings.

Daniel found himself alone with Waring in the library afterwards, drinking coffee. They talked about the little people, and Daniel found the American, on his own, far more impressive than he had previously thought. He was intelligent, and he talked sense; his character, with no others intervening, was without the ragged nervous edge that was generally in evidence. One other person, in particular, not intervening: Helen was in the lounge with the rest. Daniel could not restrain a slight feeling of contempt for someone who permitted his mind so to be dominated by conflict with another, but it was very slight. Chiefly, he admired Waring, and found him interesting.

What he said made sense: their discovery presented a problem which they, by themselves, were not equipped to solve. The little people could not just be loosed on the world, or rather, Waring amended, the world could not be loosed on them: the rats, by comparison, had been no more than a minor nuisance. It was very important to look at this as rationally as possible. They had rights, of course, and their rights must be protected, but what was the best way of protecting them? Some kind of tutelage and care was obviously necessary in the first place, whatever happened eventually, and it was essential to work out who would be best qualified to organize this. One could call in a government department—the Irish government, presumably—but the most likely immediate result was confusion, and quite possibly the letting in of exploiting commercial bodies. Decisions were going to have to be made,

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and you were unlikely to get swift and rational decisions from government departments.

"Especially," Daniel suggested, "Irish government departments."

Waring grinned. "Especially. I would say we need somebody who is disinterested, who can study the whole thing intelligently and dispassionately, and who has a high enough reputation—a world reputation—so that he can stand up to the politicians and officials. Despite the emotive prejudices"—his voice briefly took on a sour note—"that sounds to me like a scientist."

"Anyone in particular?"

Waring shrugged. "Not so far. How about you?"

"My mind's a blank. I'm not very well up on scientists."

"We can think about it a bit. We don't need to rush it. The main thing is that we should agree on general principles. Someone's got to look at this straight, and with Stefan the way he is and Mat on the bottle, it looks like maybe we constitute a quorum."

"Yes," Daniel said, "I suppose it does."

"They are fascinating." Waring's voice was absorbed, contemplative. "Absolutely fascinating."

"I suppose there's no doubt they were created the way Stefan told it? I don't know enough about biology to get the picture."

"I don't know much, either, but enough to know that it makes sense. Growth is controlled by the pituitary, and the foetus is completely formed by the time it's three inches long. Except for finger nails and such. And the head being disproportionately large. Which it still is with them, to some extent. Miniatures have been born before, by accident, though not so small. It's not basically unreasonable, granted the intention."

"It takes some granting."

"Well, yes."

"Another fascinating quirk of the German mind."

"Nazi."

"Is there a difference?"

"Einstein was a German. So was Schweitzer."

"Yes," Daniel said. "One was thrown out and the other left voluntarily."

Waring grinned. "You English can keep a hate up."

"You don't think it's justified?"

"I was thinking that we're in Ireland, and the Black-and-Tans were not long before the Storm Troopers."

"That's quite a different thing."

"Is it? I guess so." Waring stood up. "I think I'll go and take another look at them. You coming?"

"Not just yet."

The door closed behind Waring, and Daniel was alone. He was glad of that. He had enjoyed the

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conversation and the company, apart from the trivial gibe at the end, but there was gratification in being alone, in a spacious and well appointed room, on a day like this. There were some clouds in the sky, but they had had long spells of sunshine and were in one now. The French windows stood open, and a breeze came in, but too slight a one to move the heavy curtains. The air was warm and soft, conducive, he thought pleasantly, to sensuality. Bridget had promised she would come and join him when she had finished the necessary supervision of Mrs. Malone and Mary. He could enjoy the thought of that, with a relaxed anticipation. They might take a walk together. There was a garden, and they could wander up one of the paths that led to small oases of long grass in the bog. His mind was running cheerfully on this, when he glimpsed a movement in the corner of his vision. He looked there, and saw Emma.

He had thought she was with the rest, but they were so small and moved so quickly and lightly that they were difficult to keep track of. She must have slipped in here directly after lunch, and sat, quiet and out of the way, while Waring and he were talking. She came towards him across the carpet, and he marvelled again at her diminutive beauty. He racked his mind for the few German words he knew, and said softly:

"Komm, Emma. Komm zu mir."

She came and stood beside the chair, her golden hair almost touching his leg. She put her arms up to him, and he lifted her onto his chest; he was lying back in the club chair. Her warmth and tiny weight were charming, and her loveliness delighted the eye. Holding her lightly with one hand, he touched her face with a finger of the other.

"Schon," he said. *"Sehr schon."*

Her response first surprised, then amused him. Her hands went to the front of her dress, and loosened it. Minutely feminine, she lifted the dress over her head and freed her arms from the sleeves. Like a little girl, he thought, childishly vain of the beauty of her body, wanting to show her prettiness to someone who admired it. At the same time, it was disconcerting: she was quite naked, her nudity almost, but not entirely, sexless.

"Schon," he repeated. He picked up the discarded dress, and offered it to her. "But you'd better get dressed again, there's a good girl."

With a swift twisting movement, she slid down from his chest to his lap. He thought she was getting down to the floor, that, with a child's wilfulness, she wanted to continue showing off, to dance perhaps on the carpet, a teasing, innocently sensual fairy princess. The awareness of the small prob-

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ing fingers—the realization of her actual intention—came as a greater, more physical shock than anything that had happened here so far.

"My God!" He found himself gasping for breath as he abruptly sat up. "My God."

He lifted her and set her on the carpet, and put the dress beside her. He was still trembling. He said:

"Get dressed. Put your dress on."

She could not understand the words, of course, but he thought the harshness of his tone conveyed his meaning. She looked up at him, the dark eyes inscrutable under the summery hair. Then, submissively, she picked up the dress, and wriggled into it. She fastened it and stood there, demure, watching him and waiting.

It was only at this point, with her whiteness clothed again, that Daniel was aware of having noticed something about her body, a difference. Her back. The skin delicate and unblemished. There were no marks of whipping there.

He stared down at her. All that, and, despite it, such beauty and serenity. How could it be possible?

XIV

Keeping Mrs. Malone from hysterics was proving a more arduous and more continuous job than Bridget had thought. When she had first told her about the little people, her reaction had shown traces both of doubt and anxiety, but had not been extreme. She had not accepted Bridget's offer to show her Greta, and her first sight of one of them had been when Emma was brought into the kitchen by Daniel. She had plainly been shocked and frightened, but Bridget had hoped that a little time for reflection, helped by a drop of brandy, would enable her to absorb the experience.

She had returned from the library to find that she had been too optimistic about this. Mrs. Malone was going about her duties after a fashion, but she remained chalk white and trembling. Bridget made her sit down, and gave her a long and careful talking to. In reply to this, Mrs. Malone whispered:

"But it's not natural, ma'am. It's not natural, at all. I can't . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Bridget said briskly:

"No, it's not natural. They're not natural, if you like. But the point is that they're entirely harmless. They're not going to hurt you. You must stop being frightened of them."

She said: "My uncle Ben saw something once, coming past a churchyard, when he was only a boy. And he never spoke a word after, though he'll be seventy-one next Easter." She shuddered. "I

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can't abide the thought of them."

Bridget paused. "Do you want to leave?" she asked her.

It was a bluff, she admitted, and a not entirely fair one. She had learned that this house, and latterly she herself, represented a desperately needed security to Mrs. Malone. Her nervous garrulousness and brashness, on that first visit to Killabeg back in February, had disguised a fear that she would be put out and have to seek a position elsewhere. The fear was not rational—she was, under proper supervision, a reasonably good housekeeper—but stemmed from a background in which callousness and contempt had far outweighed what little affection came her way. She had gone, at thirteen, from a hard home life to a harder one of domestic service, and had been married at seventeen to a groom who first got her pregnant and then, through a bout of physical violence, caused her to have a miscarriage which also prevented her having further children. He had died after five years of misery for her, and she had gone back to service. Two years later she had married a second time, a man whose cruelty was cold and spiteful rather than brutal, and who had spent eight years systematically undermining what little confidence she had in herself. He had then abandoned her—she had no idea where he had gone, except that he had talked sometimes about South America—and she had gone into service for the third time. Her experiences there had not been much happier—her timidity had been found and exploited—until she had come to Seamus Chauncey at Killabeg. Seamus' attitude—one of complete indifference provided his meals were cooked after a fashion and he was not troubled—had come as blessed rain after drought, and Bridget's succeeding regime, of patient supervision with no unkindness or hectoring, had been the sunburst that set the flowers growing in the neglected soil. She had responded, Bridget thought smugly, astonishingly well. And the world outside, now that she had known some warmth, was all the colder and more cheerless.

Mrs. Malone said: "Ah, no! It's the last thing I would do." She paused, and added with a desperate honesty: "And where would I go, if I left?"

"Then stop worrying," Bridget told her. "They're strange little things, but nothing to be frightened of. You should pity them, rather. They've had a hard time of it."

"Will you be keeping them long here in the house?"

"Not long, I should think."

Mrs. Malone nodded. "I'll try to pull meself together. I know I'm not being sensible."

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"After all, they've been in the house all this time, remember. They were here before you came."

"And it was them himself went up to play with in the tower each day?" She shuddered. "He was a queer man, but I didn't think him to be as queer as that. As to them being here, I didn't know of them, did I? There's a lot of things you can live with easily enough until you know about them."

"But you know they're not likely to harm you. If they were going to murder you in your bed, they could have crept up and done it any time in the past four months, instead of stealing pathetic bits of food and things from the kitchen. Don't you see that?"

She had shuddered again, and more violently, at the reference to being murdered, but the force of the argument seemed to have penetrated at last. She said:

"I'll try to keep a hold on meself, ma'am. I'll promise you that."

The hold, however, slipped over lunch, the equilibrium nudged, perhaps, by the sight of the seven little people eating at the double table. Bridget came back into the kitchen to find Mrs. Malone sobbing uncontrollably in a chair, with Mary holding one of her hands and making ineffectual sounds of comfort. Mrs. Malone looked up, with streaming eyes. Her voice a gasping howl, she said:

"I'm ashamed of meself, ma'am. Oh God, I'm that ashamed! And the more so with Mary here not troubled at all. It's just that . . . I'm so ashamed." The howl increased in volume. "Oh, so ashamed . . ."

Bridget said: "All right, Mary. You can be seeing to the clearing. Now, Mrs. Malone, stop that at once."

"I can't help being afraid, ma'am. And when I set eyes on them, it's worse."

"Here. Drink this."

She had poured her a very stiff brandy indeed. Mrs. Malone made feeble protest, but allowed herself to be overruled. Gradually, with a combination of bullying and coaxing and the assistant effect of the brandy, she calmed down. In ten minutes, Bridget could leave her. She was not entirely sober, but at least she was not hysterical.

Bridget went from the kitchen up to the Morwitz's room. Stefan had insisted on taking the tray up himself, and had said that Hanni was all right apart from a headache, but Bridget felt responsible all the same. She knocked, and Hanni's voice bade her come in. Hanni was in bed, Stefan lying, fully clothed, on the other bed. The tray stood on the table, the food untouched. Seeing her look at it, Hanni said apologetically:

"I am so sorry that we have wasted such good food."

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Bridget asked: "How are you feeling?"

"Better. I am sorry about—all this. I have not behaved well, I think."

"There's no question of that." Bridget hesitated. "It must have been an unpleasant shock for you."

"It is not easy to explain. Except . . ." Her voice was steady, the only appeal that of her eyes. "I lost many people during the war. All my family, many of them young women. They could be my cousins—the little people."

Bridget had not thought much about her. Stefan had been so obviously the dominating partner in the marriage, Hanni retiring and acquiescent, that she had concentrated her attention on him, taking it for granted that what made him happy would satisfy Hanni also. This might still be true, but Bridget was suddenly aware of the deep strength in the woman. It shone the more clearly through her present unhappiness: a strength that had faced and overcome despair. "They could be my cousins." It was a frightening glimpse into an abyss, whose existence had been known, but whose vertiginous depths had been beyond her imagination.

She said: "Don't hurt yourself by talking about it."

"Thinking is enough, and one cannot avoid thinking. But I know it does no good to talk. It does not help to tell of horrors."

"It's not that. If talking helps . . ."

Hanni shook her head. "No. There is nothing to say, except recite names. And the names by themselves are meaningless."

There was a silence. Bridget said: "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No. But thank you. Do you need Stefan to help you talk to them?"

Stefan, remaining silent, looked towards his wife. It was a look difficult to fathom. Unhappiness, a call for help—but more than that, Bridget thought, much more. She said:

"There's no hurry about that."

"He will come down later," Hanni said.

"If you would like to leave . . ." Bridget said. "If you think it would be better to go away . . ."

The suggestion, this time, was sincere, but Hanni gave it the same prompt answer that Mrs. Malone had done.

"No. Where would one go?"

She had told Daniel she would see him in the library when she was free, but before that Bridget went to her room to freshen up and tidy herself. She thought of Hanni and Stefan at first, of what it must be like to carry that sort of burden for a quarter of a century, with as long a time ahead, but the exercise was futile. To set oneself a task of agonizing over another's

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misery had an obscene quality—was, she felt, a kind of insult to the victims. They had suffered and died, and it was best for the memory to fade. If she had been one of them, she thought, she would have wanted that.

It was different with the legacies that were inescapable—the memories that the Morwitzes shared, or didn't share. One could do nothing to help them. And, of course, the little people, a living, breathing legacy, a monument in flesh and blood. That was different altogether: a problem that challenged and had to be answered. Putting on fresh lipstick, she thought of the various suggestions which, with varying degrees of seriousness, had been put forward. Scientists, circuses, publicity agents. They struck her as dreary, or unpleasant, or absurd, and in no case likely to contribute to the happiness of the little people. They would be better off staying here.

Working her lips together to spread the lipstick, she thought about it. Was there anything wrong in that? It was the place they were used to, the only place they knew. Now that the days of torments by Seamus were over and done with, there was no reason why they should not be entirely happy here. It was a place easy to protect from the world, from the TV men and the reporters. People would have to be told about them—it was not the sort of secret that could be kept indefinitely, or even for very long—but that did not mean that they would have to be exploited. She remembered reading about two sets of quintuplets, of much the same age, of which one had been completely private and out of the world's eye. There was no reason why that should not be done in this case. And obviously it would be to their good to do so. It was the only way, really, in which there could be a chance of their leading something like natural lives.

To their good. Her mirrored face had been looking at her, but suddenly she became conscious of it in a sharper way. The well brushed, slightly waving auburn hair, the good brow, candid grey eyes in a broad, quite handsome face . . . and behind that fine facade, small selfish self-deceiving thoughts crawling. An exclusive arrangement, for the good of the little people, but under whose management? And so to whose chief benefit? One would need to keep the place going as a hotel, of course, to pay for their keep and their protection, and just think how exclusive that could be. No need to advertise the principal attraction; the difficulty, whatever the rates were, would lie in selecting the ones to be chosen for the privilege of paying them.

With a surge of self-contempt, she remembered the previous

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night, and Waring saying that, before Greta was caught, he had suspected she and Daniel were working some sort of trick, to obtain publicity. What she had just been contemplating was worse, far worse.

In a bad temper with herself, she quickly finished her make-up and went downstairs, slamming the bedroom door behind her. She checked the kitchen and found Mrs. Malone subdued but apparently under control, and went along to the library. Daniel was sitting in one of the chairs, alone in the room except for the little Emma, who stood motionless a few feet away, watching him. She had realized, on the way down, that her annoyance with herself had set her, as far as Daniel was concerned, in the centre of a see-saw. She had been afraid that, out of sorts as she was, he might say something which would make her angry with him, too. It was unreasonable, but she knew herself well enough to recognize it as a genuine danger.

But the first sight of him dispelled that. He was looking unhappy, she thought, and she felt a wave of sympathy and affection for him. Poor Daniel—how much had happened since that letter came from O'Hanlon & O'Hanlon, and he had suggested that they should go over to Dublin for the weekend. First deserted by his fiancée; then, when he was patiently followed after her, summarily thrown out of her bed. And now enmeshed in all this, which must be worrying the careful, legal side of his mind no end. No wonder he was looking a bit miserable. She contrasted his unobtrusive non-demonstrative strength with Mat's naked emotions. There was a lot to be said for an Englishman, however infuriating the unimaginativeness could be at times.

Going to him, she stooped and kissed him. There was constraint in his response, and she realized that his attention was not entirely on her. He was looking past her at Emma. They were, it was true, under surveillance, though it was not a surveillance that Bridget felt she could take seriously. All the same . . . She put her hands to his neck, and whispered:

"Let's go out."

Obediently, he got up. Bridget took his hand and started towards the open door. He took a couple of steps, and hung back. She said:

"What is it?"

"What about Emma?"

"Well, what? You don't want to take her along with us, do you?"

"No." He made it very emphatic. "Most certainly not. I was wondering . . . do we just leave her here? With the door open?"

"What else? We're not treating them as prisoners."

"No, I suppose not." He followed her through the door. "How

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are we treating them, though? How ought we to treat them?"

"Let's not worry about that for half an hour." She drew a deep breath of the soft warm air, its scent compounded of grass and flowers and the peaty smell of the bog. "It's good to get away from things for a little while."

They walked hand in hand across the lawn. It needed cutting, she saw. When Danny Moore came in from the village, she would have to get him onto it. Mat had done it the last time, but it was not terribly likely that he would volunteer again. She said:

"I've been thinking."

"About them?"

She said impatiently: "No. Not about them. Do you think you can find out the best place for advertising the house? The *Irish Times*, I suppose. And where else? *Country Life*? Isn't there something that deals particularly with guest houses?"

She had thought the suggestion would please him, but he merely said, in an abstracted way:

"I think there is. I'll look it up when I get back to the office."

Bridget released his hand, and took his upper arm and squeezed it.

"Look," she said, "is something worrying you?"

He was silent; then said: "What are they?"

"What do you mean—what are they?"

"It's not merely a question of size. Not even of their conditioning by—that pair of mad men. There's something else, something very odd."

"Does it matter? Can't we forget them for a bit? They're not our problem."

"Then whose?"

"I don't know." She thought about it. "I suppose they are, damn them. But not right at this moment. This is time out. My holiday half-hour. Let's just watch the grass grow."

He said: "Waring thinks it's important that they should be handed over to someone properly qualified—rather than getting involved with government departments, or the press and television. I'm inclined to agree with him."

"I'm sure you're both right. Are we going through into the garden?"

It was quiet in the garden, the air hot and still and brushed with the smell of rose and honeysuckle. Bees embroidered the silence, and Bridget wondered where their nest was. It might have been worth while putting in a few hives for honey. They walked on along the winding paths, hidden, as they penetrated deeper, from the entrance. No one else was here. They reached the bower at the far end. Approaching it, one could see nothing of the inside; from within, though, one looked out between slats and the green ten-

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drils of honeysuckle, and the path was plainly visible for quite a long way—visible and empty. Footsteps, moreover, would be heard: the paths were laid with gravel which crunched underfoot.

A place, in fact, Bridget reflected, where one could scarcely be surprised by an intruder. She lay back and waited, in pleasantly languorous anticipation, for Daniel to do something about that.

Instead, he said: "They don't smile, or laugh. Isn't a sense of humour one of the essential human features? I don't think they can laugh."

Bridget stood up. "I don't know," she said. "But do tell me when you've worked it out."

He said: "I'm sorry. You're not going back already?"

"Yes, but you stay here and meditate."

He reached out for her hand and pulled her back beside him. The strength was there all right, well remembered and altogether satisfactory. He started kissing her, and that was satisfactory too, up to a point. Realizing just what the point was, she experienced frustration and annoyance and, equally strongly, a determination not to let the annoyance show. After a time she gently disengaged herself, and smiled at him. The smile might be an essentially human feature, she thought, but it did not always have anything to do with a sense of humour.

She said: "Darling, I do have to go, I'm afraid. I've just remembered—I've been so mixed up with all this business that I haven't got Mrs. Malone started on the stew for tomorrow, and if I don't remind her she'll never remember herself."

"I'll come with you."

She pressed him back. "No. If I can manage it, I'll slip out again."

And smile nicely, she thought, as you grit your teeth. How long since you were congratulating yourself on having got this one all for your own? As she was going, Daniel said:

"There's something I want to tell you."

She turned and stared at him. "What?"

He looked back without speaking for a few moments.

"No," he said finally. "It can wait." He chewed his lip. "You're not the only one who feels mixed up at the moment."

"Never mind." The smile came on again. Or grimace? "We'll probably both feel better later on."

On her way back to the house, she saw Mat and Cherry walking together, over towards the lake. They made a handsome couple and, from a distance of a hundred yards, looked happy and at ease. *Venus a sa proie,* she thought. In which case, *bon appetit.* There were, it was perfectly true, things that needed seeing to, and al-

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though Mrs. Malone had been warned about the stew, a little checking on that point was desirable. She went in through the library windows. There was no sign of Emma, but the door to the passage stood open. Someone must have opened it—she realized again the helplessness of the little people in a world where door handles stood at least three times their height, and needed far more than their strength to turn. They required and deserved sympathy, and if Daniel had become somewhat deeply engrossed in the problem that was to his credit. While you, she informed herself, are a selfish and oversexed bitch. Depressed by this unflattering insight, she pushed open the kitchen door, calling for Mrs. Malone.

Mrs. Malone, she saw at once, was not there, but Mary was. She was doing something at the sink. In reply to Bridget's question, she said no, she did not know where Mrs. Malone was—she had been down to the kitchen garden, gathering peas, and the kitchen had been empty when she got back.

The stew had been started. There were sliced onions and diced carrots and turnip on the chopping board, and a piece of dripping in the stew pot on top of the stove. She felt a slight unease at the sight. One of Mrs. Malone's better qualities was an ability to concentrate on the job on hand; it was not like her to break off at a halfway stage. The most likely explanation was that her nerves had got the better of her again. In which case she might have taken refuge where? In her room, or locked in the bathroom?

The obvious thing to do was look for her.

She went through the house, starting on the upper floor, calling Mrs. Malone's name. There was no sign of her, and no response. None of the bathrooms was occupied, and her room was empty. Coming down, she found the Selkirks in the lounge, arguing about something. They had not seen her, either. Waring asked if there was anything he could do; she thanked him, but said no.

The unease was fairly considerable now. The thought that sprang to mind was that she had panicked after all, and fled the house. She would surely make for the road and not the bog—any sane person would. But was a woman unhinged by fear sane in that sense?

She decided she had better go out and look for her. Before putting that into effect, she remembered that she had not yet checked the cellars. It was scarcely likely that she would have gone down there—since the discovery of the little people the cellars had provided one of the focus points for her dread, and Bridget had had to get supplies up herself that morning. Nonetheless, she sup-

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posed she ought to make a quick check. She went to the stairs door, opened it, and snapped on the light. Then, herself rooted by fear and nausea, she stared down at the huddled and motionless figure that lay at the bottom.

(*To be concluded next month*)

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SCIENCE

Writers are not notably a steady or punctual breed, and one thing editors worry about are deadlines. Which makes the essay below remarkable. Dr. Asimov's column has appeared in every issue of F&SF since November 1958; this one is the 100th. And if there was ever a hair grayed by a missed deadline, it was before our time and before the time of the previous editor. We hope to get 100 more—at least. [The sixth hard cover collection of these essays has just been published by Doubleday under the title FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN.]

IMPOSSIBLE, THAT'S ALL!

by Isaac Asimov

AS EVERYONE KNOWS, I AM, AS YET, still in my late youth, and nothing suits me less than to play the role of conventional graybeard—the fuddy-duddy scientist with the closed mind.

And yet circumstances occasionally force me into what seems to be such a role. For instance, I was watching the first episode of "It's About Time" the other day. This is a TV farce, introduced this season, which deals with a couple of bumbling astronauts who find themselves in a mythical Stone Age in which cavemen talk English and consort with dinosaurs.

This was explained by saying that the astronauts had inadvertently travelled faster than light. As one of them said to the other, "Einstein's theory states that if you go faster than light, time turns backward."

There was no canned laughter at that line but, naturally, I laughed anyway, and my young daughter, who was also watching, wanted to know why I laughed.

I said, off-handedly, "You can't go faster than light."

She said, "Why not?"

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"Because you just can't," I explained.

"With scientists making new inventions all the time, why can't you someday?"

I came out with the clinching ace, "Because it's impossible, that's all."

Which she promptly trumped with a lofty, "*Nothing* is impossible!"

I've heard that argument before, too. I've lost track of the number of letters that have reached me demanding, "*Why* can't you go faster than light?" "How do you *know* you can't go faster than light?" "What makes you think that *someday* we won't break the time barrier?"

And I've got to disappoint them all by standing firm on the you-can't-go-faster-than-light thesis. And I know people turn away from me in disappointment wondering if perhaps I'm just a member of the Scientific Establishment—a fuddy-duddy scientist with a closed mind.

So let's talk about the impossible.

For instance, we can start with 2 + 2. That equals 4, right? Add another 2 and you have 6, and then 8, and then 10, and so on infinitum. If we start with 0 and add 2's one at a time, we build up the set of "even numbers" which is, by this definition, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 . . .

You can see, intuitively (that is, just by looking at them), that all even numbers are divisible by 2. Or, since you define an even number as being of the form 2 + 2 + 2 + 2. . . , then you see you can convert that to 2(1 + 1 + 1 + 1 . . .) for as many or as few 2's in the sum as you wish. Consequently, all even numbers are divisible by 2.*

Now suppose you want to add any two even numbers: 2 + 4; or 72 + 106; or 8,640,772 + 54; or any two at all. What can you say about the answer? Well, any even number can be written as the sum of a series of 2's so that you are adding 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 . . . and 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 . . . with the result that the sum must be both sets of 2's added together: 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 . . . + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2. . . . . .

Therefore, since the sum of the even numbers is also built up out of 2's, it, too, is even. In other words: *The sum of two even numbers is even.* In fact, it is easy to reason out the generalization that the number obtained by adding or subtracting any number of even numbers must be even—provided we are willing to call 0 an even number as well as such negative numbers as —2, —4, —6 and so on.

** I have a feeling that this reasoning would not be sufficiently rigorous to satisfy a real mathematician, but I'm coming out with the right answer, so never mind.*

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What is an odd number? That can be defined as any number that is 1 greater than an even number and that therefore cannot be built up out of 2's alone. The odd numbers are $2+1$, $2+2+1$, $2+2+2+1$, and so on; or 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 . . . If we call 0 an even number, then 1 is an odd number since $1 = 0 + 1$. And if negative numbers such as -2, -4, -6 . . . are even, then negative numbers such as -1, -3, -5 . . . are odd.

Obviously, if you add or subtract any quantity of even numbers you cannot get an odd number, because in dealing with numbers built up of 2's only, where is that 1 (which is an integral portion of the definition of odd numbers) to come from?

So we conclude: it is *impossible* to obtain an odd number by adding or subtracting any quantity of even numbers.

It is no use at all to say to me: "How do you know? Have you tried every possible combination of even numbers? Maybe there is some queer combination of unusual even numbers which you've never investigated and which gives an odd number when added together."

The answer is: "I don't have to investigate every possible combination of even numbers. The definition of even and odd numbers is expressed in such a way as to make it impossible to obtain odd numbers by adding and subtracting even numbers."

And if they then say: "But I have here a very complicated addition of twenty different even numbers and the sum is odd," I must then answer: "You've made an arithmetical error."

They may then say plaintively: "But how can you tell? Won't you add it up and see for yourself?"

I suppose I could then add it up just to show them their arithmetical error and urge them to choke on it, but I would be completely within my rights to refuse and say: "The arithmetical error is there. Find it for yourself. I won't waste my time."

Naturally, the case of evens adding up to evens is so simple an open-and-shut case, that no one with the slightest arithmetical intuition would argue with me. They would nod their heads and say: "Of course."

But when things grow more complicaetd, chances of bitterness rise.

Thus, mathematicians have shown that it is impossible to square the circle, duplicate the cube, or trisect an angle by use of a compass and straight-edge alone (see TOOLS OF THE TRADE, *F & SF*, September 1960). This is a much more complicated demonstration than that which suffices to show that even numbers cannot be summed to yield

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an odd number, but it is of the same general type. The conclusion is just as certain and just as indisputable, and no real mathematician argues with it.

Nevertheless, any number of amateurs come up every year with demonstrations that purport to prove that the circle can be squared, or the cube duplicated, or the angle trisected with compass and straight-edge alone. Often they send these demonstrations to mathematicians who may then send them back promptly without bothering to look at them.

The amateur may feel that he is the subject of a conspiracy, the victim of professionals who won't even *look* at the evidence. As it happens, the mathematician doesn't have to. He knows a fallacy is present somewhere, but sometimes it isn't easy to find such a fallacy in a hundred pages of reasoning and diagrams. Why spend hours or days of valuable time in the hunt for something that *must* be there?

Let's look at a second kind of "impossible" now. Since I've mentioned fallacies, let's consider one in detail. In other words, we will consider a line of reasoning, each step of which seems perfectly legitimate, but which reaches a final conclusion that is patently ridiculous.

To do this, let's take the simplest algebraic fallacy I know; one that is so simple, even *I* managed to catch it at once when I was first faced with it.

We start with two quantities, a and b, which we set equal to each other:

$$a = b \qquad \text{(Equation 1)}$$

We can multiply both sides of an equation by the same value, without affecting the equality, so let's multiply both sides by a:

$$a^2 = ab \qquad \text{(Equation 2)}$$

We can subtract the same value from both sides of an equation without affecting the equality, so let's subtract b^2 from both sides:

$$a^2 - b^2 = ab - b^2 \qquad \text{(Equation 3)}$$

It so happens that the expression $a^2 - b^2$ can be obtained by multiplying $a + b$ and $a - b$, so that $a^2 - b^2$ can be written $(a + b)(a - b)$. And $ab - b^2$ is the product of b and $a - b$. Now we have:

$$(a + b)(a - b) = b(a - b) \qquad \text{(Equation 4)}$$

We can divide both sides of an equation by the same value without affecting the equality, so let's divide by $a - b$. This means that the $a - b$ factor on both sides of the equation drop out and we are left with:

$$a + b = b \qquad \text{(Equation 5)}$$

Since $a = b$ (Equation 1), we can say that $a + b$ is the same as

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$b + b$. Therefore Equation 5 becomes:

$$b + b = b \qquad \text{(Equation 6)}$$

$$2b = b \qquad \text{(Equation 7)}$$

Now, if we divide both sides of Equation 7 by b, we are left with our grand and ridiculous conclusion that:

$$2 = 1 \qquad \text{(Equation 8)}$$

What's wrong? Look back a bit and see where I said, "We can divide both sides of an equation by the same value without affecting the equality, so let's divide by $a - b$."

But earlier I had said that $a = b$, so that $a - b$ is equal to $b - b$, which is 0. Therefore, when I say, "let's divide by $a - b$," I am saying, "let's divide by 0" and that is not allowed in mathematics.

You might object at once and say, "*Why* isn't it allowed?"

The answer is a simple one. If division by 0 were to be allowed, then it becomes possible to prove that $1 = 2$, as I have just shown you. Indeed, it becomes possible to prove that any number at all, positive, negative, fractional, irrational, imaginary or transcendental is equal to any other number at all. Such a mathematical system in which all numbers are equal has no use and mathematicians don't want it.

In working up the rules that govern the various mathematical operations, then, mathematicians find that the simplest way to avoid such an unwanted occurrence is simply to forbid division by zero.

So we have a different sense of the word "impossible." Division by zero isn't impossible in the sense that it can't be done in the manipulation of symbols. I did it just above when I divided both sides of an equation by $a - b$. It's impossible in the sense that it breaks the rules of the game. As soon as it is done, the name of the game is no longer mathematics. One can't divide by zero *and* engage in mathematics at the same time.

Now let's pass on to physics. In mathematics, one creates an ideal world which may have its analogies to reality, but need not necessarily. In physics, however, one must be guided by one's best estimate of what reality is and then describe it as best one can.

As a result of *experience* (not deduction from basic premises, or definition for the sake of convenience) certain generalizations can be made about the physical universe. These are usually called "laws of nature" which is a pretentious term dating from the over-confidence of the so-called Age of Reason. Actually, they are just generalizations.

The most powerful generalization we know of can be stated thusly: *The total energy present in a closed system is constant* (where a closed

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system, in this case, is one into which energy cannot enter and from which energy cannot depart, so that the only truly closed system is the Universe as a whole).

This is the famous "law of conservation of energy" and it introduces an "impossibility." We can say: "It is impossible to create or destroy energy."

This statement, however, while casually made I don't know how many times by I don't know how many people, is not absolutely true. The creation or destruction of energy is not an impossibility in the sense that it would represent a contradiction in terms (as in the case of the mathematical odd and even) or defy a convention (as in the case of division by zero).

What is really meant is that the experience of mankind has failed to show a single instance in which the creation or destruction of energy has indisputably been brought about. But the experience of mankind is not infinite and there may be unlooked-for conditions under which that experience could be shown to be insufficient. What then?

On two different occasions, since the law of conservation of energy was announced, it seemed that it might have to be abandoned as not, after all, an absolutely valid generalization. First, scientists discovered, at the end of the 19th Century, that the energy given off by radioactive materials seemed to come from nowhere. Was energy being created? Einstein demonstrated this was not so in 1905 when he suggested that mass was a type of energy, and that the energy given off in radioactivity (or other nuclear reactions) was balanced by an equivalent loss of mass. This was eventually shown to be correct.

Then, in the 1920's, scientists discovered that beta particles were being fired out of atoms with less energy than they ought to have. Was energy being destroyed? Pauli suggested in 1931 that this was not so, explaining the energy-loss by postulating the existence of a new particle, the neutrino, which was actually detected a quarter-century later.

Yet what if the law of conservation of energy had been disproved and cast aside on either of these occasions? What would that mean?

It is important to remember that science consists of observations *and* theories, and that the destruction of a theory does *not* mean the destruction of the observations. Many non-scientists are confused in this respect. Since conservation of energy requires us to eat food and breathe oxygen if we are to live, there is the vague thought that if one could only find the law to be false, one would suddenly no longer need to eat food or breathe oxygen.

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Yet the necessity of eating and breathing is an observed fact that is independent of theory. If any generalization accounting for the necessity is proven false, then we will simply need another generalization accounting for that same necessity.

For instance, throughout the 19th Century, chemists worked on the basis that the law of conservation of mass was fundamental. This held that the total mass of any closed system was constant. All their experience and observation seemed to prove to 19th Century chemists that this generalization was valid.

Then came Einstein in 1905 and showed that mass could be converted into energy so that mass, in itself, was not conserved.

Did that show the experience of the 19th Century chemists to have been ludicrously wrong? Not at all. You can walk into a laboratory today—right now—and work with those chemical phenomena known in the 19th Century and make use of techniques available in the 19th Century, and you will be unable to demonstrate the flaw in the law of conservation of mass, even though you know what you are looking for. That flaw appeared only with the discovery of nuclear reactions, which involve much greater mass-energy interconversions than do chemical reactions, and 19th Century chemists did not know of nuclear reactions.

In fact, it is safe to say that whenever a useful generalization is upset, one which has withstood the probings of scientists for a good, long time, it is upset in regions of investigation that have been freshly opened up and which the older scientists were unaware of. What's more, the older generalization would remain just as useful as ever in those areas in which it has been established.

Thus, in ordinary chemical reactions, chemists still work on the assumption that mass is conserved, even though they know that it isn't *really*. The degree to which it is not conserved in ordinary reactions is so tiny that it can be safely ignored. Similarly if the law of conservation of energy had stumbled and fallen over the matter of the neutrino, it would nevertheless have remained useful, and would have continued to be used, in the ordinary world of macroscopic physics.

A few years back, on the other hand, something called the "Dean drive" was highly touted in science fiction circles. It purported to be a device which converted rotational motion into one-way linear motion, thus breaking the law of conservation of angular momentum and the law of conservation of linear momentum. Both laws have held up under the intense scrutiny of any number of physicists for three centuries, and the chance that they could be broken on a large scale in just those

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areas where they have been under scrutiny longest and most intensely is virtually nil. Consequently, I remained stubbornly uninterested in the Dean drive and willingly left its investigation to others who might, just possibly, also be interested in finding some way to square the circle with compass and straight-edge.

Next consider the three laws of motion advanced by Isaac Newton in the 1680's. For over two centuries, the keenest efforts of the keenest minds found no exceptions to Newton's laws of motion. Indeed, every relevant experiment supported them, and the complex structure of mechanics was based upon them. By 1900 it seemed extremely unlikely that any significant flaw could have been found in the laws of motion *in the areas in which they had been studied.*

We all know, though, that in 1905, Einstein revised Newton's laws of motion by introducing his own relativistic view of the Universe. This revision, however, was only significant in new areas beyond the ken of 18th and 19th Century physics. It was only significant, for instance, at great velocities which could not adequately be investigated by Newton and his followers with the techniques at their disposal. At all ordinary velocities (say less than a thousand miles a second) Einstein's version of the laws of motion does not differ significantly from Newton's.

According to Newton's laws of motion, for instance, different velocities could be added together according to the rules of simple arithmetic. Suppose a train is passing you at 20 miles an hour, and a boy on the train throws a ball at 20 miles an hour in the direction of the train's motion. To the body, moving with the train, the ball is moving 20 miles an hour. To you, however, watching from the side of the track, the velocity of the train and the ball add together, and the ball is moving at the rate of 40 miles an hour. In other words, you can say that the velocity of a ball varies from observer to observer according to the velocity of the source of the thrown ball relative to the observer.

What spoiled the Newtonian view was the fact that what works for thrown balls does not seem to work for light. As Michelson and Morley showed in 1886 (see THE LIGHT THAT FAILED, *F & SF*, June 1963) the velocity of light was always measured at the same value by any observer regardless of the motion of the light-source relative to that observer.

Thus, to put it simply, a moving flashlight will throw out a beam of light that will travel at the same velocity as the beam of light emerging from a stationary flashlight. What's more, a moving flashlight will

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send out a beam of light at the same velocity in the direction of its motion as against the direction of its motion.

To be sure, Newton knew about light, but he could not use it to check his laws of motion. The comparative velocity of light beams moving in different directions could not be measured with sufficient accuracy to test those laws until Michelson invented his interferometer.

All attempts to explain this behavior of light by means of Newton's laws failed, and Einstein decided to work backward. He said, in effect: "Let us begin by accepting the behavior of light as a fact. Let's suppose that its measured velocity in a vacuum is independent of the motion of its source. How, now, can we arrange the laws of motion to allow for that, while still allowing for all the facts concerning thrown balls that have been observed over the last three centuries?"

He thereupon worked up a view of the universe in which objects grew shorter in the direction of their motion as their velocity relative to an observer increased. They would also grow more massive, and would experience a slower passage of time.

This seems to be against "common sense" but what we call "common sense" is merely the experience we have gained concerning objects moving at low velocities.* The changes in length, mass and time-rate are so small at ordinary velocities that they cannot be detected. Working at ordinary velocities, one can assume, without significant error, that the Newtonian laws of motion hold.

But the Einsteinian view depends on the validity of his basic assumption. What if the velocity of light in a vacuum is *not* independent of the motion of its source?

Well, for one thing no one has yet observed any difference in light's velocity in a vacuum with motion of the source—and believe me, people have looked, if only because the discovery of such a difference would mean an automatic Nobel prize. Every time new techniques of greater delicacy are discovered, one of the first things done is to check the velocity of light from a moving source. So far Einstein's assumption has always held up.

Then, too, you can judge the value of an assumption by the accuracy of the conclusions one can deduce from it. The Einsteinian view makes certain predictions concerning the behavior of particles at great velocities. Such velocities were never observed by 18th and 19th Century physicists, which is why the Newtonian view survived. With the

* *This is like the "common sense" that tells us the Earth is flat because we commonly deal with portions so small that their gentle curvature goes unnoticed.*

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discovery of radioactivity, however, scientists found at their disposal crowds of subatomic particles moving at velocities of many thousands of miles per second.

Such particles, moving at such velocities, would have one set of properties according to the Newtonian view, and quite another set according to the Einsteinian view. Careful measurement showed the Einsteinian view to be correct every time—and to a high degree of accuracy.

Even Einstein's suggestion that mass and energy are interconvertible is based on his assumption about the speed of light, and that, too, has held up exactly all the way from delicate measurements on individual subatomic particles to the explosion of a hundred megaton hydrogen bomb.

Einstein's special theory of relativity is thus established beyond a reasonable doubt.

Can it be, though, that in the future, Einstein's view will be found to be a mere approximation as Newton's view was—although Einstein's would be, of course, a closer approximation?

Yes, of course that is possible. But the failure of the Einsteinian approximation would become evident only in areas of investigation beyond those in which it has stood up over and over, and would probably require techniques of measurement outside our present knowledge. What's more, any new and more accurate view of the universe would leave the Einsteinian view close enough in all the areas in which it seems close enough now.

Now to get to the nub of the article:

One of the consequences of the Einsteinian view is that nothing material can be measured as going faster than the speed of light in a vacuum, nor can information in any form be sent from point A to point B in less time than light (in a vacuum) could travel from point A to point B.

It is this which is usually translated into the briefer and more arrogant phrase: "You can't go faster than the speed of light."

This view is backed in two ways.

First, nothing material has ever been measured as moving faster than the speed of light in a vacuum. Speeding subatomic particles approach the speed of light quite closely under some conditions, and velocities equal to 99.99+ percent that of light in a vacuum have been measured—but never any velocity quite reaching that of light, let alone surpassing it. If it were possible to go faster than light, it

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would be extremely puzzling to fail to find an occasional particle which just manages to go an extra few miles a second in order to surpass light's velocity. If, however, the velocity of light is an absolute speed-limit, the failure of any particle to exceed it, no matter how close it gets, becomes understandable.

Second, if anything went faster than light, the entire structure of the Einsteinian view would be shattered, but it would not alter all the observations that have been made in the last sixty years that are in perfect accord with the theory.

We would then be faced with the problem of working out another theory which would explain all the observed facts that Einstein's theory explains so neatly, and yet one which also allowed motion faster than light.

That would be so difficult a task that I don't think there is a physicist alive today who would be willing to try his hand at it—or who would succeed if he did.

Therefore, one can conclude that the chances of anything being able to move faster than the speed of light, while not impossible in the mathematical sense, are so vanishingly small, that when I am belligerently asked *why* nothing can go faster than the speed of light, I find that the best possible short explanation is:

"Because it's impossible, that's all!"

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Fred Hoyle is professor of astronomy at Cambridge University, an eminent astronomer and cosmologist who is one of the major proponents of the "continuous creation" theory. (Mr. Hoyle is also the author of several science fiction novels; the latest, OCTOBER THE FIRST IS TOO LATE, *was reviewed here in January.) To construct their theories of the structure of the universe, cosmologists must dismiss the notion that what we see from Earth is merely a local condition. What this "cosmological principle" has to do with this pointed and amusing story about TV and bears and such may not be immediately apparent. However, the assumption that local conditions are the same everywhere can be a tricky one. Cosmologists have no choice; the rest of us do. And we all have our theories, don't we?*

BLACKMAIL

by Fred Hoyle

ANGUS CARRUTHERS WAS A wayward, impish genius. Genius is not the same thing as high ability. Men of great talent commonly spread their efforts, often very effectively, over a wide front. The true genius devotes the whole of his skill, his energies, his intelligence, to a particular objective, which he pursues unrelentingly.

Early in life, Carruthers became sceptical of human superiority over other animals. Already in his early teens he understood exactly where the difference lies—it lies in the ability of humans to pool their knowledge through speech, in the ability through speech to educate the young. The challenging problem to his keen mind was to find a system of communication, every bit as powerful as language, that could be made available to others of the higher animals. The basic idea was not original; it was the determination to carry the idea through to its conclusion that was new. Carruthers pursued his objective inflexibly down the years.

Gussie had no patience with people who talked and chattered to animals. If animals had the capacity to understand language wouldn't they have done it already, he said, thousands of years ago? Talk was utterly and completely pointless. You were just damned stupid if you thought you were going to teach English to your pet dog or cat. The thing to do was to understand the world

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from the point of view of the dog or cat. Once you'd got yourself into *their* system it would be time enough to think about trying to get them into *your* system.

Gussie had no close friends. I suppose I was about as near to being a friend as anyone, yet even I would see him only perhaps once in six months. There was always something refreshingly different when you happened to run into him. He might have grown a black spade beard, or he might just have had a crew-cut. He might be wearing a flowing cape, or he might be neatly tailored in a Bond Street suit. He always trusted me well enough to show off his latest experiments. At the least they were remarkable, at the best they went far beyond anything I had heard of, or read about. To my repeated suggestions that he simply must 'publish' he always responded with a long wheezy laugh. To me it seemed just plain common sense to publish, if only to raise money for the experiments, but Gussie obviously didn't see it this way. How he managed for money, I could never discover. I supposed him to have a private income, which was very likely correct.

One day I received a note asking me to proceed to such-and-such an address, sometime near 4 p.m. on a certain Saturday. There was nothing unusual in my receiving a note, for Carruthers had got in touch with me several times before in this way. It was the address which came as the surprise, a house in a Croydon suburb. On previous occasions I had always gone out to some decrepit barn of a place in remotest Hertfordshire. The idea of Gussie in Croydon somehow didn't fit. I was sufficiently intrigued to put off a previous appointment and to hie myself along at the appropriate hour.

My wild notion that Carruthers might have got himself well and truly wed, that he might have settled down in a nine-to-five job, turned out to be quite wrong. The big tortoise shell spectacles he had sported at our previous meeting were gone, replaced by plain steel rims. His lank black hair was medium long this time. He had a lugubrious look about him, as if he had just been rehearsing the part of Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Come in," he wheezed.

"What's the idea, living in these parts?" I asked as I slipped off my overcoat. For answer, he broke into a whistling, croaking laugh.

"Better take a look, in there."

The door to which Gussie pointed was closed. I was pretty sure I would find animals 'in there', and so it proved. Although the room was darkened by a drawn curtain, there was sufficient light for me to see three creatures crouched around a television set. They were intently watching the second half of a game of Rugby League foot-

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ball. There was a cat with a big rust-red patch on the top of its head. There was a poodle, which cocked an eye at me for a fleeting second as I went in, and there was a furry animal sprawled in a big armchair. As I went in, I had the odd impression of the animal lifting a paw, as if by way of greeting. Then I realised it was a small brown bear.

I had known Gussie long enough now, I had seen enough of his work, to realise that any comment in words would be ridiculous and superfluous. I had long ago learned the right procedure, to do exactly the same thing as the animals themselves were doing. Since I have always been partial to rugby, I was able to settle down quite naturally to watch the game in company with this amazing trio. Every so often I found myself catching the bright, alert eyes of the bear. I soon realised that, whereas I was mainly interested in the run of the ball, the animals were mainly interested in the tackling, *qua* tackling. Once when a player was brought down particularly heavily there was a muffled yap from the poodle, instantly answered by a grunt from the bear.

After perhaps twenty minutes I was startled by a really loud bark from the dog, there being nothing at all in the game to warrant such an outburst. Evidently the dog wanted to attract the attention of the engrossed bear, for when the bear looked up quizzically the dog pointed a dramatic paw toward a clock standing a couple of yards to the left of the television set. Immediately the bear lumbered from its chair to the set. It fumbled with the controls. There was a click, and to my astonishment we were on another channel. A wrestling bout had just begun.

The bear rolled back to its chair. It stretched itself, resting lazily on the base of the spine, arms raised with the claws cupped behind the head. One of the wrestlers spun the other violently. There was a loud thwack as the unfortunate fellow cracked his head on a ring post. At this, the cat let out the strangest animal noise I had ever heard. Then it settled down into a deep powerful purr.

I had seen and heard enough. As I quitted the room the bear waved me out, much in the style of royalty and visiting heads of state. I found Gussie placidly drinking tea in what was evidently the main sitting room of the house. To my frenzied requests to be told exactly what it meant, Gussie responded with his usual asthmatic laugh. Instead of answering my questions he asked some of his own.

"I want your advice, professionally as a lawyer. There's nothing illegal in the animals watching television, is there? Or in the bear switching the programs?"

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"How could there be?"

"The situation's a bit complicated. Here, take a look at this."

Carruthers handed me a typewritten list. It covered a week of television programs. If this represented viewing by the animals the set must have been switched on more or less continuously. The programs were all of a type, sport, westerns, suspense plays, films of violence.

"What they love," said Gussie by way of explanation, "is the sight of humans bashing themselves to pieces. Really, of course, it's more or less the usual popular taste, only a bit more so."

I noticed the name of a well-known rating firm on the letterhead.

"What's this heading here? I mean, what's all this to do with the TV ratings?"

Gussie fizzed and crackled like a soda-siphon.

"That's exactly the point. This house here is one of the odd few hundreds used in compiling the weekly ratings. That's why I asked if there was anything wrong in Bingo doing the switching."

"You don't mean viewing by those animals is going into the ratings?"

"Not only here, but in three other houses I've bought. I've got a team of chaps in each of them. Bears take quite naturally to the switching business."

"There'll be merry hell to pay if it comes out. Can't you see what the papers will make of it?"

"Very clearly indeed."

The point hit me at last. Gussie could hardly have come on four houses by chance, all of which just happened to be hooked up to the TV rating system. As far as I could see there wasn't anything illegal in what he'd done, so long as he didn't make any threats or demands. As if he read my thoughts, he pushed a slip of paper under my nose. It was a cheque for £50,000.

"Unsolicited," he wheezed, "came out of the blue. From somebody in the advertising game, I suppose. Hush money. The problem is, do I put myself in the wrong if I cash it?"

Before I could form an opinion on this tricky question there came a tinkling of breaking glass.

"Another one gone," Gussie muttered. "I haven't been able to teach Bingo to use the vertical or horizontal holds. Whenever anything goes wrong, or the program goes off for a minute, he hammers away at the thing. It's always the tube that goes."

"It must be quite a costly business."

"Averages about a dozen a week. I always keep a spare set ready. Be a good fellow and give me a hand with it. They'll get pretty testy if we don't move smartly."

We lifted what seemed like a

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brand new set from out of a cupboard. Each gripping an end of it, we edged our way to the television snuggery. From inside, I was now aware of a strident uproar, compounded from the bark of a dog, the grunt of a bear, and the shrill moan of a red-headed cat. It was the uproar of animals suddenly denied their intellectual pabulum.

COMING SOON

Next month we bring you another story by **Fred Hoyle,** longer and quite different from the one above. Its title is ZOOMEN, and it concerns nine captives on a huge spacecraft—a suspenseful and thoughtful science fiction story that you will not want to miss. Next month's issue will also include the surprising conclusion to **John Christopher's** THE LITTLE PEOPLE. The March issue is on sale January 31. Watch for it.

The April issue of F&SF will feature a new and quite unusual novelet by **Roger Zelazny.** Also along soon will be new stories from **Ron Goulart, Fritz Leiber, Keith Laumer,** and **Mack Reynolds.**

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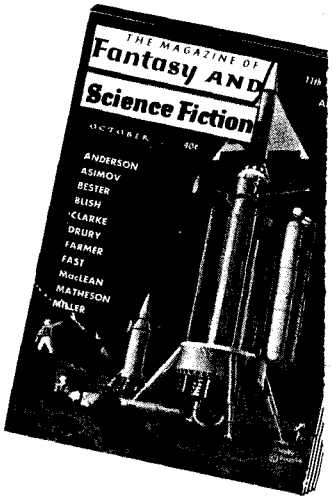

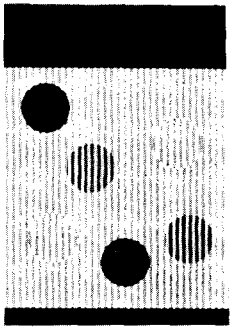

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